WALTER MURCH

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WALTER MURCH

PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS

Curated by Judy Collischan Van Wagner

Essays: Paul Cummings
Daniel Robbins
Judy Collischan Van Wagner

Hillwood Art Gallery, Long Island University; C.W. Post Campus, Greenvale, New York 11548

The Bulb, 1951, oil on canvas, 21 x 17''. Collection of Edward R. Downe, Jr. Photo: Otto E. Nelson

The Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris
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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Fourteen years ago as a Ph.D. candidate at University of Iowa, I completed my dissertation, a *catalogue raisonne* of the work of Walter Murch. Subsequently, I have become aware that what attracted me to Murch's work then remains a significant factor today. His work stood apart from that of his contemporaries and still appears as the original and unique work of an individual. Particularly in view of the heightened impact of marketing strategies upon the recent art world, the singular paintings and drawings of Murch seem the more distinctive and praiseworthy. Thus, it has been my pleasure to assemble a group of works by this artist, for reconsideration and evaluation.

In the process of organizing the exhibition, I received assistance and encouragement from several people, namely Walter S. Murch, Susan Lubowsky, Jack Tilton, Sid Deutsch and Edward R. Downe, Jr. I am also appreciative of the efforts and enthusiasm demonstrated by Paul Cummings and Daniel Robbins in writing essays for the catalogue. The show receives greater exposure and attention by virtue of The Whitney Museum staff's curatorial decision to exhibit it at their Philip Morris branch, and I am grateful for this opportunity to present the artist's work from several developmental periods in the city he worked in for many years.

A crucial element was, of course, the willingness of various persons and institutions to lend work to the show. For their magnanimity, I cite:

The Whitney Museum of American Art
Walter S. Murch
Edward R. Downe, Jr.
Chase Manhattan Bank
Sid Deutsch Gallery
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy
The Brooklyn Museum
Andrew Crispo
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Kennedy Galleries
Frank Lavaty
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Wadsworth Atheneum

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JCVW

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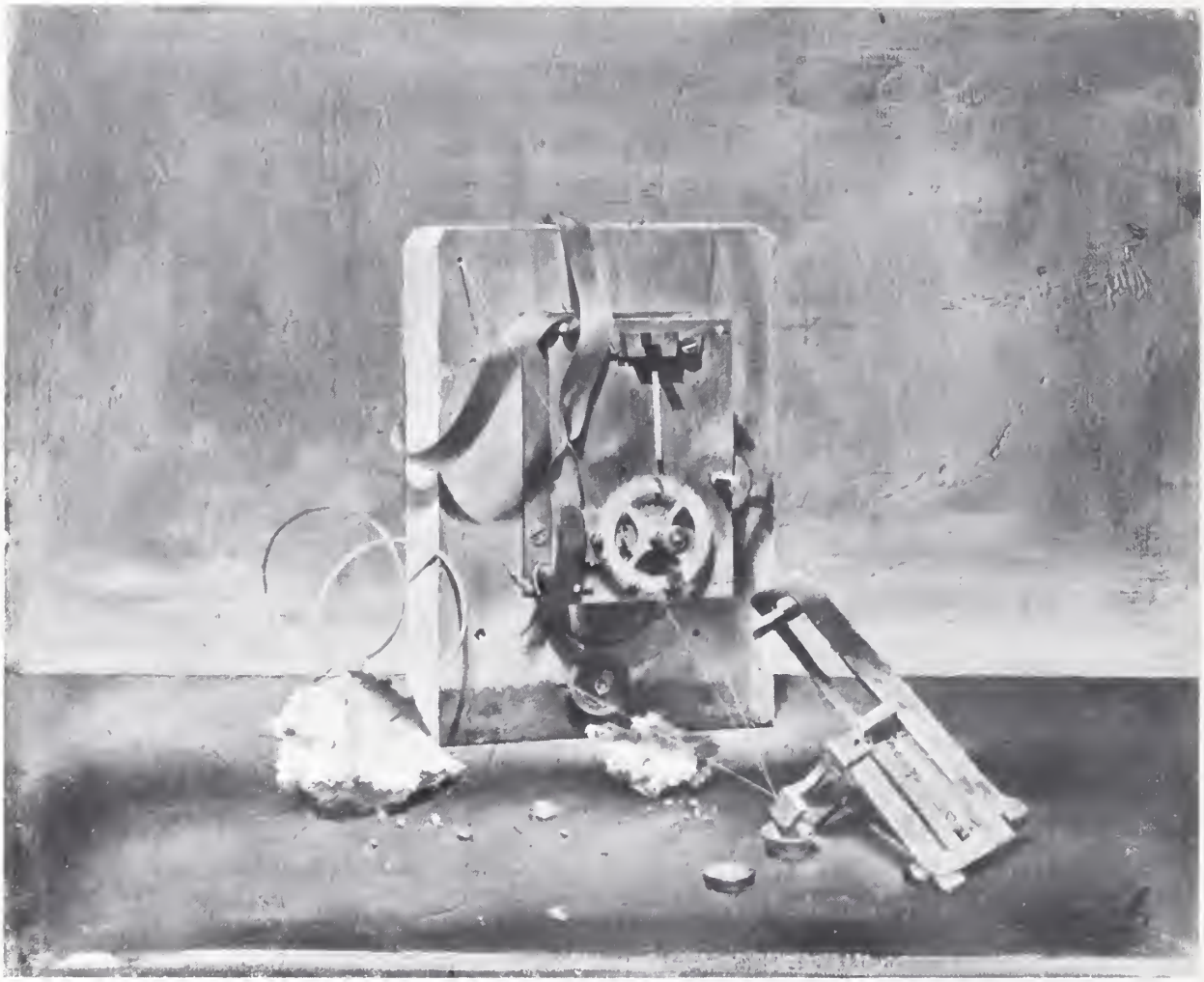
Self-Portrait (W.T.M.), 1940, oil on board, 14 x 12 1/2". The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; Lambert Fund Purchase, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



Monolith of Time, 1941, oil on canvas 15 x 19''. Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford; Gift of Henry Schnakenberg

WALTER MURCH: A 'PECULIAR BEAUTY'

Judy Collischan Van Wagner

An aim of Walter Murch in art was as he stated to achieve a "peculiar beauty" that would, "... strike a chord inside, deep inside one, a chord that is inexplainable ..."[1] His attainment of this goal was dependent upon several factors, namely the influences of certain artists and types of art from past and concurrent times, his novel choice of still life subjects, uncommon technical practices and his own modest, reflective nature. His personal blend of these elements resulted in an idiosyncratic body of work that appears to exist outside of a particular time or place. As such, his oeuvre seems curious, distant and an anomaly in the context of art in this century. The strange aura of Murch's paintings and drawings is mysterious and otherwordly in its effect upon viewers. The overall impression is one of exceptional rarity and enigmatic magic.

Generally, Murch's efforts were devoted to paintings in a still life format distinguished by his unique selection of objects, particularly mechanisms and a juxtaposition of traditional with atypical articles. For instance, a car lock might be accompanied by an onion and a lemon located amid curtain rod holders. His preference for still life was not in itself an unusual factor given historical precedent and updated versions by Pop and Super Realist artists; its phenomenal aspect existed in his singular predilection for unlikely combinations, frequently machine with fruit or vegetable, that were rendered in a painterly manner. In brief, his work blended historical with modern elements. Modernist traits present were utilization of machines and manmade items as subjects, employment of accidental effects in painting and consideration of the art work as possessive of a separate identity from that of nature. From Old Master paintings, he gleaned some conventional subject matter, a layering of media to produce pentimento and an impasto surface, dramatic chiaroscuro and compositional elements such as placement of objects in a centralized, frontal position along a shallow plane of otherwise undifferentiated space. On the one hand he was motivated by Surrealist art, the teachings of Arshile Gorky, the example of Joseph Cornell and the means of Abstract Expressionist artists, especially Jackson Pollock. On the other, he was inspired by Baroque and Rococo painters such as Rembrandt, Vermeer and particularly Chardin. The controlling factor in bringing past and present together was the force of the personality of the man himself. His innate moderation and thoughtful demeanor allowed him to accept a variety of strains into his work and to visually realize a mystery in existence.

A major underlying motive, that of dual disposition toward convention and invention was established in part by his youthful background. He grew up in an urban but relatively quiet setting in Canada within a family of musical interests and talent. In

keeping with his heritage, Murch studied and played the violin for several years. His father operated a successful jewelry business, keeping shops filled with diminutive and intricately designed objects. Later some of these items, such as watches and clocks, found their way into Murch's work as did the carved stone architectural fragments fashioned and pointed out by his grandfather.[2] Foregoing a career in music, Murch chose art and attended the Ontario School of Art from 1925 to 1927. His education here in art was relatively academic in orientation though some of his teachers were among the Canadian vanguard group known as The Seven and he was certainly aware of their highly expressionistic paintings. Likewise, he was familiar with social realist currents in America, but not greatly affected by this work. Thus, his early years were spent among cultural but conservative circumstances. It was only after he visited and decided to stay in New York City in 1927, that he was truly touched by important contemporaneous artists and styles.

In New York, he supported himself through various jobs as a commercial artist while continuing to take classes at the Art Students League and Grand Central School of Art. He was twenty years old at the time but continued to pursue a study of art for four more years. His voluntarily extended education in itself suggests a certain propensity toward caution and circumspection. nevertheless, he did during this time, meet and become acquainted with Arshile Gorky, a teacher at Grand Central School. Eventually, this artist was to be considered an important pioneer and transitional figure in expanding aesthetical considerations along new lines that caused New York to become a world art center. In the latter part of this decade, Gorky was especially enamored with the work of Cézanne and certainly must have impressed this artist's importance upon his student. Indeed, Murch's work from these early years appears indebted to the nineteenth century artist, and it was Gorky who taught him about modernist art and its theory. In particular, he emphasized painting as independent from nature with its own laws and properties and the importance of means in art, that is, of paint itself and its application. Gorky's lessons in painting as a separately identifiable object and media as a positive, contributive factor became increasingly significant to Murch's evolvement of casual procedures in creating a work of art.

Like Gorky, the younger man was fascinated by Surrealist work that was being shown more frequently in New York with a bench mark exhibition, *Dada, Fantastic Art and Surrealism* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936. Murch extended his knowledge of Surrealism through repeated attendance at the Julien Levy and Brummer galleries where he became interested in the paintings of Pierre Roy, a then prominent artist.

Like others similarly grouped as Surrealists, Roy established dream-like visions by juxtaposing unlike but recognizable elements in a cool, exacting manner. Usually, he presented diverse objects close to the picture surface in the foreground of an exaggeratedly deep space. The Surrealist flavor that subsequently permeated Murch's work was characterized by the same unusual combinations of objects painted prominently toward the face of the work.

Another individual whose work betrayed a Surrealist cast was Joseph Cornell, an artist who charmed Murch and with whom he was friendly for several years. Although the connection is not direct, Cornell working more three-dimensionally with actual rather than painted objects, there was a resemblance in the fact that both men placed dissimilar items side by side within an artistic context. In this manner, subject matter was isolated and elevated on a more esoteric plane and was made to appear more precious and brought to the attention of viewers. Cornell's "boxes" and collaged works acquired the stature of miniature worlds, the individual bodies relating to one another rather than some exterior situation; likewise, Murch's pictures reflected an inward-turning impulse.

Within the next decade, art's parameters and definition were to be expanded by the efforts of a small band of artists whose work was dubbed Abstract Expressionism. Surrealism and abstract work served as sources as did the paintings of Gorky who was to be viewed as a precursory figure for this new American tendency. In a sense, Peggy Guggenheim and Betty Parsons were also intermediaries as the former supported both Surrealist and abstract art and the latter showed the work of these emergent artists in her newly established gallery. Noteworthy is the fact that in the early forties, Parsons chose to show work by both Walter Murch and Jackson Pollock in perhaps what amounts to an indication of her catholic as opposed to focused taste. Murch's association with Parsons put him directly in touch with progressive work of the day, particularly that of Pollock. As the two artists' work evolved, Murch became interested in a use of accidental effects and total involvement in the act of painting. Although Murch formulated his own direction, it was unquestionably affected by his absorption of innovative work and personalities of the day.

At the same time, Murch satisfied a personal attraction to the work of Old Master painters. He made repeated trips to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and was especially drawn to the work of Rembrandt, Vermeer and Chardin. Their pictures drew his admiration because of certain specific traits, expressly an impasto application of pigment, dramatic lighting and the ordinariness of some of their subjects. Especially in

the work of Chardin, there existed an aura of hushed reverence surrounding simple and common objects. His portrayal of a bowl of plums or spinning top was enhanced and intensified by a luminosity that not only revealed subject matter but set it apart in a psychological fashion. That is, they were made to seem animate and reflective of the preciousness of their existence. Often, Chardin set objects along a frontal plane as on display for viewers' respect and edification. In his own work, Murch employed similar compositional and formal devices to achieve an emotionally heightened atmosphere of spiritual implications.

That Murch's art historical predilections centered around and after the period called "Baroque" is also a circumstance germane to his work in terms of his concentration upon still life. This category, as old as Roman wall paintings, reached a zenith of popularity in Northern Europe during this era. Coincidentally, French politicians and academicians established and codified a Grand Manner for painting wherein still life was considered of lesser importance behind historical and mythological topics involving the human figure. Though not as prominently stated, this hierarchy has persisted into the most recent forms of art. Thus, in selecting still life, Murch embraced a genre of lower status that he extended through his choices of mundane objects.

In the thirties and forties, then, Murch was essentially guided by Gorky toward modernist aesthetics, sympathetic toward Surrealist and Abstract Expressionist painting and impressed by the work of certain masters. As diverse as these influences might seem, they were, in effect, dovetailed quite smoothly into Murch's developing style. Comparison between two paintings, *Monolith of Time*, 1941, and *Still Life with Red Ribbon*, 1945, serve to clarify Murch's turn in emphasis from Surrealist to Old Masterish effects. The earlier work is characterized by a cool, generalized lighting and unusual association of objects. Surrealists Roy and Yves Tanguy likewise presented diverse bodies, their separateness accentuated by overall blue-gray tonalities. The work of all three artists conveyed a dream-like state of mind; however, Murch did not employ the exaggeratedly deep spatial effects of Roy and Tanguy, nor was he interested in the sexual connotations and underlying threat of violence implied by their work. More particular elements reflective of Surrealism in Murch's painting were the bringing together of manmade and natural subjects and his predilection for rendition of machinery. Machines, though common to twentieth century life, were not conventionally portrayed in art. The focal object, a block, is made transparent at the bottom and opaque above in a strange combination of properties embodied in one substance. Moreover, close scrutiny reveals that this shape seems to be held in place by threads

running through holes piercing the mass and attached to a device located in the foreground. These lines act in defining three dimensional space and cutting across the picture plane. Basically, this piece evokes Surrealist feelings of strangeness and dislocation. These qualities persist in the artist's *oeuvre,* though they are consolidated with others found in art history.

Still Life with Red Ribbon, while retaining Surrealist elements, represents the artist's concern for effects he found in Old Master works. Illustrating the former classification are the presence of objects uncommon to art, such as geometric forms, bits of rock and mechanisms and the cool tone. There is greater contrast of color in this painting and the red of a ribbon is a prominent form; nevertheless, even this hue tends toward blue rather than yellow, maintaining the artist's preference for imperturbable calm and distance. His use of a ribbon in itself is similar to Roy's employment of this strip in establishing and linking space. Conversely, prominent historical components cast a romantically emotive feeling. Dramatic light effects are especially prominent as certain areas are highlighted and others thrown into darkness.(3) Moreover, in this work there is a thicker, looser application of pigment to the canvas providing prominent pentimento that convey a sense of the painting's past or history. The rich impasto and theatrical lighting are probably at least in part owed to Rembrandt, while placement of objects on a shallow shelf along a frontal plane, parallel to the picture surface indicates Murch's love for the work of Chardin. A type of religious or mystical emanation also seems due to the impact of Chardin.

In addition to his exceptional blend of sources from traditional and contemporaneous art, a unique feature of his work involved his curious preferences for subjects generally characterized by their otherwise prosaic existence. Most of these objects, artificial and natural, were ordinarily a part of everyday life. The lemons, melons and potatoes chosen by Murch were common to the table, kitchen and market; stones, rocks and even pieces of buildings might be found on New York streets and mechanical devices had become increasingly prevalent in the twentieth century. Among manmade items selected by Murch were those connected with his parents and early family life — watches and clocks, a phonograph, a teapot. Other things could be found in the artist's immediate vicinity, a fish at a nearby delicatessan, for example. The commonness and frequency of these goods caused them to appear the more extraordinary when lifted from their accustomed circumstances and placed on the exalted and exclusive plane of art. Cut off from familiar situations and functions, these objects appeared eccentric and special. Devoid of explanation and set apart from normal affairs, they are

presented for a longer than passing glance, a closer scrutiny and prolonged consideration. A removal in context from life to art experience endowed typical items with exceptional qualities and signficance.

The manmade objects were peculiarly distinctive even though prevalent in the twentieth century, because of their relatively novel appearance in art. Murch's special interest in manufactured products caused his work to be considered in relationship with an emergent Pop art mode.[4] In spite of divergencies in aim and result, it is helpful in fixing Murch's style to discuss the utilization of a light bulb in his work and that of Jasper Johns. Murch's first rendition in 1951 entitled *The Bulb* predates by more than a decade Johns' use of the same object. Both artists chose to elevate into an artistic context a device so commonplace that it is usually ignored on a day-to-day basis. Ordinarily, the presence of the light bulb in daily life is taken for granted as a fixture of technical accomplishment in western civilization. To find it present in art is to summon a reaction of surprise. Ultimately, the shock of finding an ignoble ready-made item as article as part of an art work may be traced to Dadaist dislocations intended to agitate a bourgeoisie audience. The impact of Dada has been of special import to Johns, not only in terms of a contradictory priority placed upon manufactured stuff generally overlooked and ignoble, but also in relation to Marcel Duchamp's analytical approach to art and emphasis upon idea. Johns' stance, not unlike that of Murch, is a contemplative one, but the younger artist is more matter-of-fact in his treatment of image-as-object in opposition to Murch's mystification of the object. Johns' brand of Dadaist intellectualization of art contrasted with Murch's greater idealization of objects on a more traditional still life stage. Both artists were concerned with establishing a painterly field, but again there is a difference. Johns' paint application existed as a more emphatic entity apart from representation, while Murch intertwined media and imagery. Johns' version, then, was the more pragmatic in relationship to Murch's empathetical attitude.

Another ingredient having to do with choice of subjects was Murch's juxtaposition of disparate objects in what can best be termed a Surrealist manner. Often he adjoined mechanisms common to present day culture with the fruits and vegetables of conventional still life. This kind of abutment of yesterday with today, nature with machine, is unique to art history — that is no other artist does this with Murch's consistency. Exemplary of his propensity are *The Lock*, 1948 and *Carburetor*, 1957. In the first piece, the inner workings of a lock are exposed and mounted on sections of rock and accompanied by onions. This unlikely combination is augmented by the artist's election

to paint the lock's interior that becomes an abstract and intricate design-within-design. In his own words, he was stimulated by what he saw inside machines:

> I bought a door lock on Amsterdam Avenue for 75¢, took it and opening it — it was like opening a tomb. I had the same excitement. Inside there were bits of shiny brass, grease and dust, in simply incredible shapes. I painted this, and I hope got some of this excitement in the work itself.[5]

The centralized position of the lock against a relatively undifferentiated background and raised as it is on a "pedestal" of rock fragments, the object is given a special significance, one worthy of such favorable location involving the concentrated attention of the artist who has in turn sustained our attention. Onions placed in various stances seem attendant to the lock; they establish space but also appear somewhat expectant. Thus, Murch's rendition and positioning of these items as well as their incongruent relationship contributes to the peculiar aura of his work.

Likewise in the *Carburetor* painting, the machine occupies front and center of the canvas; it is set up on blocks and constitutes a dominant, quite muscular image next to the precariously perched onion. Again, a strange chord is struck by the presence of these two disparate objects, each severed from an ordinary context and served up for our inspection and speculation. The stable, reposeful stance of the machine is subtly countered by the capricous pose of the onion. There is almost a classical sense of serenity and dignity here, interrupted only by the poised and potential movement of the onion. There is, then, a multi-leveled encounter projected between natural and manmade forms, of repose and the possibility of action and of viewers' encounter with the enigmatic circumstances of the painting.

The queer sensation of unusual objects appearing in situations slightly awry is expanded in some of Murch's work to include levitation of an object. This Surreal or dream-like state is excellently represented in the painting *Metronome,* 1946. Created as it was during a period of the artist's greatest enthusiasm for historicla painting, this owrk again demonstrates his concern for realizing dramatically lit forms within a heavily painted surface. Perhaps at first one dones not realize that the metronome is elevated from its shelf and the resultant discovery provokes astonishment that is tempered by Murch's matter-of-fact portrayal. Again, there is present the Surrealist trait of juxtaposition or combination of possibility and impossibility. The metronome is painted here as a solid object, yet it appears without weight. A brilliant illumination in itself seems capable of lifting the device, and certainly lends a spiritual quality that charges the field of the painting. This subjective illusion of matter rising in space sug-

gests a tenor or possibilities unknown to conscious thought. This object, a metronome infrequently found as the subject of art, reflects the artist's musical background and so relates to a personal world. A second notable portrayal is Man Ray's *Destroyed Object* of 1932, that demonstrates this artist's typically Dadaist dislocation of violent connotations. Murch's version contains no threat, only a defiance of gravity.

At times, Murch dismissed the shelf from his work altogether, suspending a body within the expanse of the painting. In these instances, the centralized form acquires an even greater affinity with the disposition of an icon. In fact, much of Murch's work is possessive of an iconic character, a reflected or mental image formed on a ritualistic plane. A case in point is *Governor II*, 1952, that contain a mechanical form placed beyond accessory temporal or spatial conditions. The item seems to hover just behind a surface of pigment. It was designed to control the speed of an automobile, but in the painting is shown bereft of function; instead it is arranged symmetrically in the center and extends at top and bottom beyond the perimeters of the picture. Shown in this manner, the instrument occupies an idealized plane beyond functional reference. Its vertical centricity further implies an iconic character. Aspects of Murch's presentation of objects dramatizes and even ecclesiasticizes them. They assume a supernatural importance, and thereby involve another contradiction that coincides with Surrealist conflux of energies. Usually, the icon takes a figurative form or that of a god in human shape, whereas the object-as-icon employs an ordinary machine. Surreal and supernatural elements coexist in the artist's work appealing to the notion of a mind's eye.

As tempting as it may be to attribute these traits of mystery and spirituality to the musings of an individual personality, it is also important to point to the fact that several of Murch's works were inspired by commissions for magazine illustrations, since he found it necessary over the course of most of his career to supplement his income as an artist with commercial work and teaching jobs. Significant is the fact that business interests coincided with those of the artist in terms of offering an image of an idealized product. That he elevated the stature of the item appealed to their dictates for attracting customers. For example, *The Calculator*, 1949, was a work intended for the cover of a magazine to illustrate a story and sell copies. In typical fashion, Murch opened up the machine andpainted its inner workings. Although it is not suspended, the object is precariously positioned atop a brick and flanked by unrelated spark plugs. Juxtaposition is less pronounced in this picture, yet there is still a degree of surprise introduced into a matter of fact. The artist's frontal and close-up view of items coin-

cided fortuitously with the wishes of clients. Moreover, Murch's idealization of object, his enhancement of its importance agreed with commercial interests. Finally, corporate personnel approved of his painterly but detailed renditions and historical references.

As Murch's personal career advanced, he placed increasing emphasis upon painterly effects. His paintings from the late forties and fifties, such as *The Calculator, Cooked Eel* and *Carburetor* led to further concentration in the last work of the sixties. Of import in this regard was the impact of Jackson Pollock, his employment of chance occurrence and total absorption in theaction of painting. Once again, painting of his day bore resemblance with that of previous eras, as Murch's enthusiasm for Pollock's work paralleled his admiration for the surface qualities of historical masterpieces. Murch applied coats of Duco or white lead to his canvases before beginning to paint.[6] In this manner, he established an irregular ground that suggested age and the movement of pigment. The undercoating was put on in a haphazard manner establishing configurations that could later inspire the artist, that heightened the objecthood of the work and that appealed physically and mentally to viewers. A thick, casually formed surface constituted a texture and memory attractive to the senses thereby inducing a flow of thought.

The artist's evolvement of technique or a manner of working occurred somewhat in concert with increased concentration upon private work encouraged by greater financial independence and his growing interest in working on paper. At times he referred to the paper pieces as "drawings", but on the whole he thought of himself as a painter and indicated his overwhelming propensity toward painting. In actuality the works on paper completed in the sixties are of a piece with those done on canvas. Generally, his efforts of this late period are distinguished by an overall atmosphere that permeates a given field, substantiating objects and enveloping them. In the end, this work represented a congealment of pervasive historical and contemporary influences. Gorky must be credited with having convinced Murch of painting as both arbitrary and absolute, and it was these aesthetical conditions that he chose to examine in later work. Pollock added to Murch's repertoire a specific incorporation of accidental effect and priority placed on total involvement on the part of the artist in order to make use of subconscious as well as conscious possibilities and contributions. From art history, he gained confirmation of his own tendency toward break-up of a plane into particles of tone and color. What Murch sought and used these guides toward was the creation of a special media environment for the materialization of an object and realization of another entity.

Two works, *Wig Forms* of 1964 and *Enlarged Doll*, 1965, may be used to elucidate the characteristics of Murch's final period. In these instances, one termed a drawing and the other a painting, the artist has achieved a like effect of painterly atmosphere through a loose application of materials. In certain areas, pigment or other medium is more dense establishing the weight of an object, while other less concentrated regions produce a feeling for what the artist termed the "air" surrounding forms. At times this "air" is vapid or vaporous and at others it is a palpable, physical substance. The result desired by him was apprehension of a momentary appearance, a kind of apparition of form that appears yet disappears, that exists and doesn't. He was delighted when a friend looked at his work and couldn't find anything, because he felt then that he had accomplished a disintegration of imagery and media allowing an event to occur in his work.[7]

A factor that must be mentioned in connection with these two pieces is the figurative subject that at first appears to be a human form until one realizes that his "model" was an object — mannequins in one case and a discarded doll in the other. An overview of his work indicates his continual fascination with things as phenomena or objects known through senses that experience their presence. His employment of juxtaposition on several levels allowed him to reach behind reality to realms that we as spectators perceive but cannot describe or explain. His accomplishment in intimating these tenuous regions was dependent upon a certain turn of mind and character that accepted and respected the object and means of art as part of a larger whole.

In essence, Murch was a quite reflective and introspective man. Betty Parsons observed a few years after the artist's death, "He wasn't in pursuit of anything. He thought he had it inside himself."[8] And, in fact, the original power and impulse behind his work originated from within him. Correspondingly, its content, meaning or message was an inward one. As a person, he was respectful toward the external world, choosing to paint the most ordinary objects and to passively allow for contributions other than his own. He not only allowed accidental incidents occurring as he put paint onto paper or canvas, at times he worked with rags to encourage the spontaneous appearance of unintended effects. Sometimes, he put sheets of paper out-of-doors permitting them to be qualified by an external environment. Occasionally, he submerged them in bath water and he laid them on the floor of his studio so that they were marked by casual steps and accumulated dust. He exaggerated a passivity in the belief that other forces would come into play. He was fond of saying, "I'm only the artist", defining himself as a sort of medium through which larger impulses could move. His

thoughtful, contemplative manner of working entailed an attempt to realize a painting in his mind before physically executing it, working from a rocking chair to settle himself into the temper of the piece and to identify with a circumstantial mood. In subjugating his will before external events, he freed internal ones that can be encountered in his work. Its potency and impact are dependent upon a degree of self-effacement. Julien Levy maintained that Murch "... was exceptionally shy and modest. As an artist those qualities are part of his greatness."[9]

The "peculiar beauty" of Walter Murch's work has to do with a kind of ethos or sense of the presence of some universal element beyond what is there, an indication of ideal or moral areas that may be perceived but not directly known. Murch's fascination with mundane but novel objects coincided with his acceptance of other realms indirectly realized. He was not an innovator in proposing new directions for art or expanding its definition, and without question he stood aside from tendencies termed "mainstream". Ultimately, his particular source of strength is his role as a solitary. The singular and valuable statement of the work is one of individual experience and insight. His work is best placed outside of a designated time or place and it is this separateness that profoundly moves viewers. Murch's work does represent a kind of phenomenon best recognized through the senses rather than thought processes having to do with order, classification and measurement. His is a rare, exceptional and wonderful work that carries us beyond fact to possibility.

[1]Walter Murch, undated note and autobiography, *Walter Murch Papers,* Archives of American Art.

[2]Reported by Daniel Robbins, *Walter Murch*, Providence: Rhode Island School of Design, 1966.

[3]In part, light effects were also dictated by necessity. Murch's multiple jobs caused him to paint at night with the use of a spotlight that would have created sharp contrasts.

[4]Gray, Cleve. "Walter Murch, Modern Alchemist," *Art in America,* LI, no. 3 (June 1963), 81:C.G. "Walter Murch—One Man Exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum," *Arts* XII (February 1968), 56 and Robbins, *Walter Murch,* 1966.

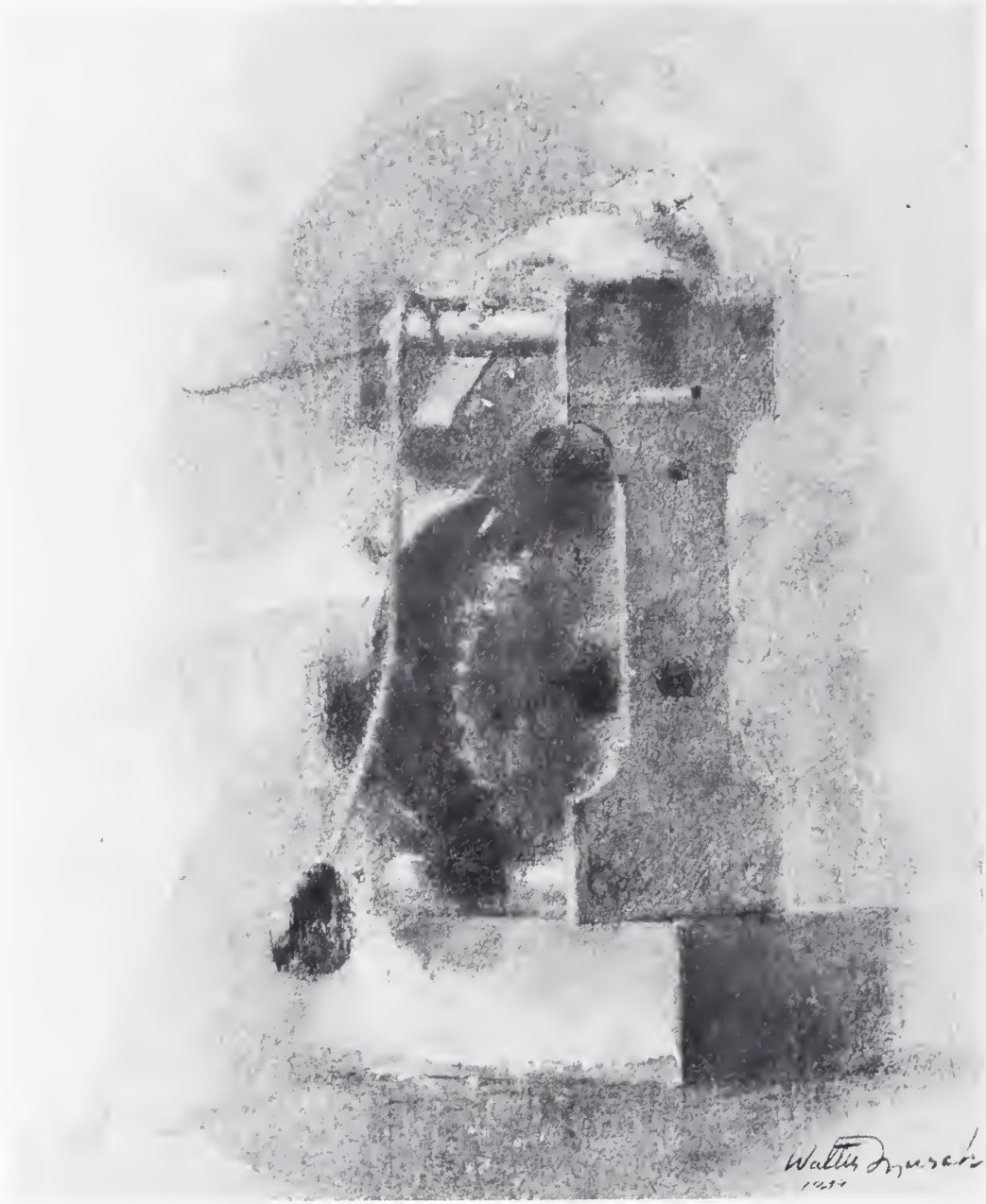
[5]Walter Murch, manuscript for a speech (probably at Skowhegan), *Walter Murch Papers*, Archives of American Art.

[6]Rosalind Browne, "Short-Range Astronomy," *Art News,* LXIV (January 1966), 38 and Gray, 83.

[7]Walter Murch, Skowhegan lecture, 1964 and Browne, 56.

[8]Betty Parson, Interview conducted by the author, May 1970.

[9]Julien Levy, Letter to the author, November 18, 1970.



Mechanism, 1949, wash on paper, 12 3/8 x 10 1/4". Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York. Photo: Gwyn Metz

Still Life with Blue Ribbon, 1945, pastel on paper, 12 x 15''. Kennedy Galleries, New York

Study with Melon, Onion and Rock, 1961, mixed media on paper, 20 x 27''. Collection of Frank Lavaty, New York. Photo: Pierre Dupuy

WALTER MURCH: LIGHT, LINE, SURFACE

Paul Cummings

In the first half of the 20th century drawing for most artists was considered a sketching exercise, rather than an effort toward the production of elaborate, finished presentation sheets. Drawing was a sketchbook rehearsal of vignettes gathered individually, often to be worked up into larger compositions. Refined style was an ill-considered objective. Skill was acknowledged as the bailiwick of the commercial portrait painter or illustrator and denigrated. The older social graces, if not the painting and drawing accomplishments, of John Singer Sargent or William Merrit Chase were lost to a generation of artists whose taste and ambition was often misguided by political rhetoric or aesthetic mismanagement. Populous taste was demonstrated in the images of the regionalist, metropolitan or country, such as Edward Hopper and Thomas Hart Benton, or the social commentators, Rockwell Kent, John Sloan or Boardman Robinson: and for modern taste, Marsden Hartley, Stuart Davis, Charles Demuth and maybe Alexander Calder. The prevailing attitude toward drawing, which is the seminal act in the evolution of art, remained placidly unaware as the century drew to its midlife turn, that modern concepts of drawing and its significance in the development of vanguard art were now nearly a century old. Newer ideas had replaced traditional ambitions and place.

It was during the 1930s and early 40s, that Walter Murch began producing pictures redolent of his initial inspiration in Chardin and others, but revealing an individual sense of taste which, carefully nurtured, soon revealed him as a master draftsman. The traditional compositional procedures he explored in these years, the tabletop composition with arranged objects, were depicted in ever increasingly shallow space. A growing interest in the effects of light and its influence on perception and experience began in late 1930s. Early subject matter is defined in a clear space with sharp light, usually emanating from a single source. He normally worked close, from four to six feet from the subject. Never a prolific draftsman, he also produced a body of commercial work, which for the most part retains the conviction of one to whom it was important, not only for a livelihood, but for the opportunity it offered to examine objects, to work and to be productive. Some of the objects he drew for the covers of *Scientific American* or *Fortune* were later incorporated into his own compositions.

Walter Murch arrived in New York, from Toronto, in 1927 to spend a summer with relatives who lived in the Bronx and to acquaint himself with the art in the city. He found a job in mid-1927, signed up at the Art Students League, where he spent a year attending the classes of various instructors. At the League he met Arshile Gorky who then taught at the Grand Central School to which Murch moved. Gorky changed Murch's mind about the drawing when his first work elicited this response: "Never

again draw like that. You don't use a pencil like that!" Gorky explained that either the medium or the artist must be allowed to take over. The medium was interesting in itself and was not merely a vehicle for the depiction of something else. Through his friendship with the older artist, Murch came to learn of the developments of modern art from Cezanne and Picasso forward. From 1936 to 1950, he supported himself with free lance art related jobs. With the demand of his clients and the economic stress of the Depression and war years, there were only the odd hours in which to pursue his own work.

By 1945, the year of *Still Life with Blue Ribbon,* one of his few pastels, Murch was in command of his mature style. From this moment forward, the concepts embodied in this work would be examined and expanded. The tabletop organization of objects, a cloth, the slight decorative touch of the blue ribbon, a memento of his years spent decorating stores, would soon cease to intrude in his future examination of nature or the shards of manmade objects.

Light is recognized almost before we apprehend the objects which are organized in this composition. Like his paintings, the drawings depict objects usually set centrally on the tabletop which frequently extends beyond the edges of the canvas or page. There are few tricks of the eye, a device to which still life painters often succumb. While Murch was known to study an object for long periods of time before deciding it was sufficiently familiar to him for use in a picture, the results we see are more than the accumulated experience of the object. The mechanism in this drawing no longer functions, the cone stands shimmering in light, nature's intransigent rock balances man's defunct machine. Man and nature are held in counterpoint. What fascinates us is the radiance which springs from what often seems to be the interior of the object. Even in this page, light does not seem directly to stream from the left of the image across to the right, though the shadows suggest it.

In the 1960s, Murch found not only his own vision of what drawing is, but the methodology of presenting forms which emerge from skeins of light or dark to hang suspended in shrouded silence. *Study with Melon, Onion and Rock,* 1961, poses questions of perception. The rock's shattered face nearly blends with the background destroying our perception of its integrity, while simultaneously drawing attention to the surface of the page as the working plane. It is carefully balanced by a dark passage of similar texture on the design's left side. If we accept the three-dimensional nature of the other objects, how does the rock have only a single surface, with the slightest of indications as to its own depth and weight. His concern is with light as the all consuming embellishment of atmosphere. Consumed by radiant light, the rock remains

a shallow freestanding facade of stone. Murch's drawing evidences a brilliantly inventive use of textures, similar to those employed by Jasper Johns, though somewhat later. While Johns' drawings retain the wholistic, linear individuality of the line as an exemplar of the gesture as it is applied to recognizable objects, Murch, on the other hand, camouflages his gestures, marks and lines whose individuality is lost in an accumulation of painterly residues, while still retaining the elemental motivation of the drawing act.

This drawing method establishes a perceptual response which continues to be examined in *Teapot,* 1962. Here the object seems to be suspended. Rendering it thus insures a disturbing effect. The traditional solidity and reassurance of the still life composition is lost when we see that the object may fall or levitate for reasons which are not clearly stated. These sensations are augmented by the evanescent nature of the light, which permeates, glows and reveals, or is firm and hard as in certain passages in the lower portion of the teapot. The slight suggestion of a table and cloth which passes beneath the pot and upward behind it as if enclosing the pot, itself has qualities of ambiguity and does little to reassure us of the reality promulgated in this expression of realism.

None of the succulent wealth of harvest depicted in Dutch, Flemish or even later Impressionist still life interests Murch. His is a world of isolation, of objects studied to reveal their individual mystery. *Colored Melon,* 1962, continues the use of a speckled watercolor surface to form an image which the mind treats in the manner of a reconstruction in the mind's eye. A supporting surface is indicated by the flat bottom of the melon and the modestly cast shadow. The paper's mottled background and pattern is interwoven in the atmospheric achievement of the drawing. It is a curious observation that much of the study of drawing is given to the reading of the artist's "handwriting" and in this instance, Murch evades us, leaving only a mark making system which camouflages his hand.

Two years later, in *Brooklyn — Architectural Fragment,* 1964, a carved decorative element set foursquare facing the picture plane, we read a form which is as solid as architecture suggests and as formal in its rigidity. Here the object is directly lit from the left, as are most of his subjects. The drawing defines the surfaces, planes, hollows, and rises with discretely drawn straightedge lines, which are then nearly obliterated by a marked and abraded surface. Apparently destroyed, the scumbled intense surface, argues for the bit of refuse which has been lifted into the realm of high art. This instance instructs us that it is the artist's art which rejects aesthetic hierarchies and itself becomes a brilliant subject of contemplation. And that is an act which the works

of Murch demand. No simple glance eliciting superficial recognization alone will reveal the substance of his labors and thought.

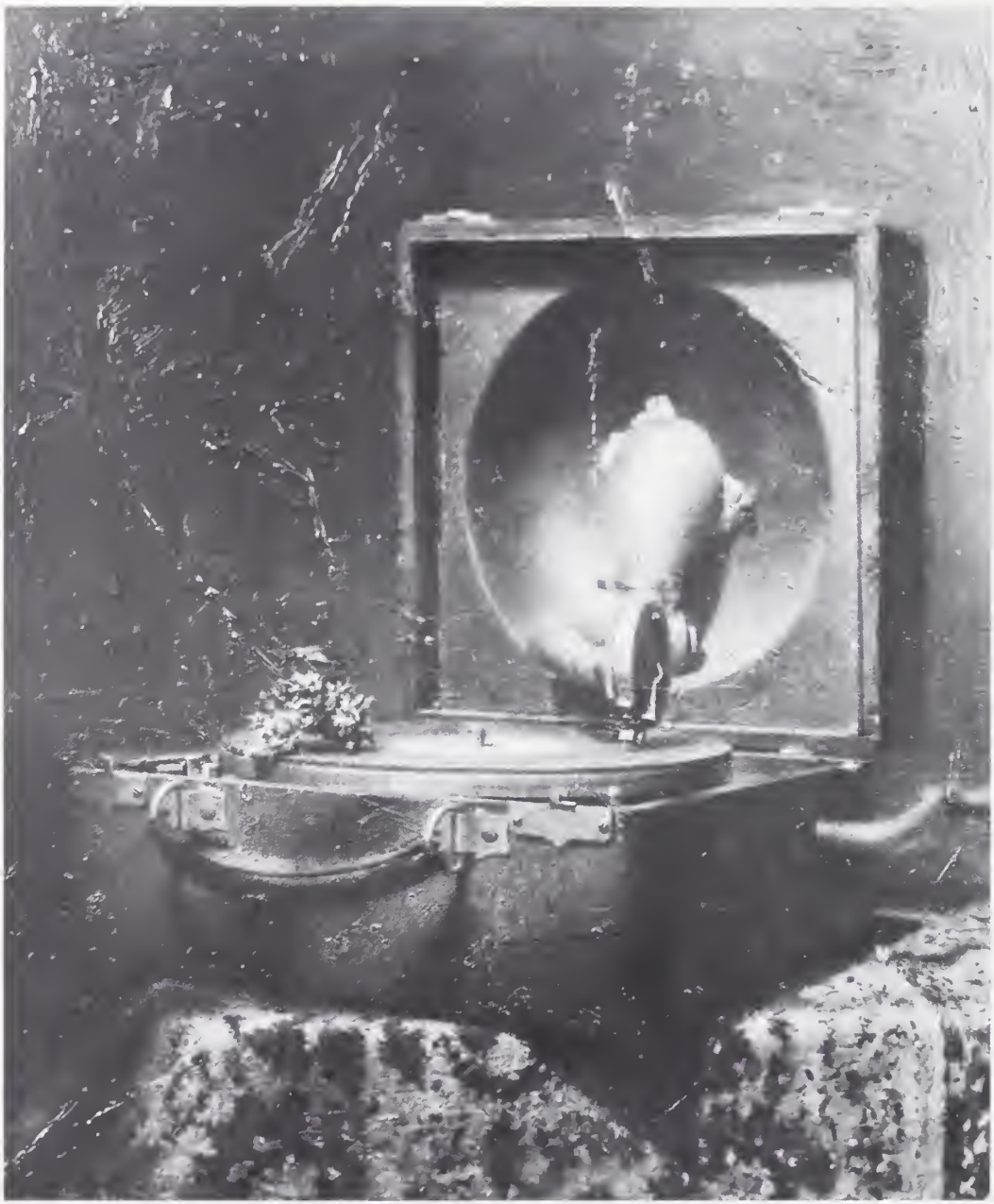
For a painter so committed to the revelations of the illuminant and transcendental character of light, he constructed a vocabulary of basic classical arithmatical shapes and forms in his compositions: cones, spheres (in various guises), rectangles (sometimes punctured as in the scientific implements), and the romantic traditional encupping device of a clutched length of cloth. The silence which emanates from these images is exquisitely experienced in *Sphere and Cloth Study,* 1964.

Of the same generation as the leading Abstract Expressionists, and respected by them, he was never moved to the monumental portable mural scale in which so many of them worked. Most of his drawings, and paintings, fall within the arching reach of the hand or wrist movement common to much drawing. Yet there is the occasionally large sheet, such as *Wig Forms,* 1964, which measures 40 x 26 inches. Of the drawings in this selection it is the one which most negates the traditional approaches to drawing. Line is messy. Seemingly endless undirected twists and turns move over a smudged surface in a series of abstract graffiti-like gestures. Nevertheless, these three headshaped objects coalesce into recognizable objects charged with all the revelatory ambiguity of a brilliant portrait painting. These inanimate forms made to hold wigs, hats and other decorative bits of ephemera are personified with Murch's curious skill in suggesting anthropomorphization. Similar accomplishments are to be experienced in *Gray Melon,* 1965.

It is a coincidence that Murch, a man who drew and painted light should have established a reputation with the cold calculated scientific implements which often graced the cover of *Scientific American.* What greater contrast to melting light than machined metal? *Pressure Gage,* 1965, is an example of his understanding of such measuring devices. By presenting them to us in a new way he reveals something of the insecure questioning mind that designed their impersonal metallic presence. The fascination with Murch is that he abjures the technical prowess of the magic realist who reconstructs an endless array of textures. Murch is able to present the spirit of the object while not being limited to surface replication. In so doing he explores his humanistic interests.

Unlike other artists concerned with the treatment of still life, Murch constantly reminds one of time's inexplicable stability, of material decay, of once brilliant designs now surpassed and neglected. He paints the nature of man unlimited by the features of a single individual. It's the spirit of the times and it's his insight into man's labors that we experience in these modest sheets charged with the enthusiasm of living and thought. They stand, as the poet Robert Duncan would say, as, "fictive certainties."

Colored Melon, 1962, oil on wallpaper, 15 1/8 x 12 3/4''. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest. Acq. # 77.1.36



The Circle, 1948, oil on canvas, 26 x 21 1/2". The Brooklyn Museum, New York; Dick S. Ramsay Fund. 49.7

WALTER MURCH: TWENTY YEARS AFTER

Daniel Robbins

In the fall of 1966, I had the pleasure and the privilege of organizing a retrospective exhibition of the paintings and drawings of Walter Murch for the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, and for seven other American and Canadian museums. At that time Murch was something rare in contemporary art, a painter of objects, of still-life. Before the eighth and final showing, fixed for opening at the Brooklyn Museum just before Christmas, 1967, Walter Murch died. He was sixty years old and at the height of his powers.

By the standards that became common during those years, he was not a famous painter before or after the retrospective. Dozens of American artists of the mid-sixties commanded far more attention from critics, from the public, from the market place. Yet Murch enjoyed immense, almost universal respect among artists, thoughtful museum people and teachers. Painters of every stripe recognized his integrity and unique vision, and this quiet, underground reputation had been growing steadily since his first exhibition at Betty Parsons' Wakefield Gallery in 1941. Eugene Berman, a star of the 1930's admired him; Murch was also the friend and pupil of Arshile Gorky; a friend of the reclusive Joseph Cornell; an acquaintance and admirer of Jackson Pollock; a friend and collaborator with Barnett Newman. Jasper Johns also appreciated Murch's painting. This range of admiration tells us much about the richness and complexity of those years when apparently antithetical tendencies could find grounds for mutual support and interest. Walter Murch had also developed across the years a small but fiathful group of collectors who waited patiently for his exhibitions, returning time after time to buy modestly priced pictures.

In standardizing the history of the post-war period to show how serious American art developed into dominant abstraction, some of the cross currents that fed the stream are overlooked because they are difficult to classify. In the 1940's Murch had been briefly identified as a surrealist, a magic realist, a Romantic realist. In the early to mid-sixties, as Pop art displaced Abstract Expressionism as the dominant style, Murch's work was associated with the then new object painting. By 1970, a few years after Murch had died, the full scale realist revival that Clement Greenberg had warned of when he preached against "homeless representation" was in full swing.

All through the decade of the seventies and even beyond its owner's death in 1982, the Betty Parsons Gallery continued to show periodically the work of Walter Murch. As always, painters came to look hard. In 1969 Harold Rosenberg gave the first of the Murch memorial lectures at Boston University where the artist had long been a beloved and influential teacher. In 1972 Judy Collischan Van Wagner, then a student

at the University of Iowa wrote her doctoral dissertation on Murch. In 1978, the Montclair Museum presented *The Alchemy of Walter Murch*. In 1984, Walter Murch was one of the artists presented by Henry Geldzahler in the P.S. 1 exhibition, UNDERKNOWN. A little earlier, a group of watercolor studies that Murch had made as trial lay-outs for a First National City Bank report on American Industry, 1954, had come to light. Favorably reviewed, many were sold to new collectors whose point of view was inevitably altered by the changed circumstances of an art scene that had now been dominated for many years by realism. Murch paintings began to appear in other galleries besides Jack Tilton's, successor in Betty Parsons West 57th Street space. Murch could be found at Sid Deutsch, at the Kennedy Galleries, at Hirschl and Adler. Occasionally, a painting or drawing would turn up at auction. The prices were climbing, not spectacularly but steadily.

It is interesting to conjecture about the relationship between the realist revival and the continuing, steadily rising interest in the work of Walter Murch.

Since this revival began with Pop, Murch should first of all be compared with the artists who emerged in that movement. The overlap exists, but it is very narrow. The subjects treated by these artists are common to the point of banality, and their work — with one or two notable exceptions — has been rich in social comment and irony. While Murch too painted common objects, his are never banal. In his hands the ordinary always became exceptional. Although he painted hats, bricks, pieces of old hardware, lightbulbs and fruit, his work was never a direct response to actual things, not a recreation or re-interpretation that derived from holding a mirror up to our consumer society. The two exceptions among the Pop artists are Jasper Johns and Jim Dine with whom Murch had more in common because they, unlike Lichtenstein, Warhol, Wesselman, Oldenburg had more ambiguous attitudes toward subject matter, Johns in particular treating it often to obliterate as much as to enhance its referentiality to American life. Yet even Johns did this in a deliberately provocative fashion, choosing subjects so powerful in social meaning that artistry arose from his uncanny ability to de-nature or neutralize the image. Johns did this by virtuoso means of painting, by the flatness of his image, by the sensousness of his method, by the many equivocal meanings he imparted to his pictures. Murch admired Johns, and Dine too, responding favorably to their painterly qualities. But, he was fundamentally different in the sense that these artists sought to compound the meanings of their subjects while Murch tried to concentrate or distill content. Johns' images have many senses, while Murch's have only one. A Johns lightbulb dangling at the end of a twisted electric cord is a

social symbol as well as a comment on Barnet Newman's *Onement* abstractions. A Murch lightbulb is a particular and isolated wonder. It isn't a universal statement about all lightbulbs, a generalization; it is about one bulb, moreover one that has been dematerialized, turned into spirit.

After Pop re-introduced subject matter into American art, and about the time that Murch died in 1967, Contemporary realism widened very quickly. Alvin Martin in his *American Realism* (San Francisco Museum, 1985) distinguished three principal tendencies, all of which differ substantially from Walter Murch. He notes a group, "Classicistic new realists", artists like William Bailey, Paul Georges, Lennart Anderson, who do not respond directly to actual things but rather reinterpret them. In contrast, another group — Philip Pearlstein, Jack Beal, Neal Welliver, Willard Midgette, Al Leslie have relied heavily on direct scrutiny of specific subjects in specific spaces. Both wings, as Martin points out, rejected abstract form, but not modernist pictorial organization. Both stressed frontal composition and compressed pictorial space as had Walter Murch before them. But in this new realist art, the surface was inevitably smooth and the forms were hard and flat, like most Pop. At about the same time there arose still another realist variant, much discussed in the critical literature of the early seventies in part because it was so clearly linked to its abstract counterpart, minimalism. This was the movement of the photographically generated image, beginning with Malcolm Morley, Robert Bechtle, Richard McLean, Chuck Close, including revivalists like John Clem Clarke, and the still-life painters Joe Raffael and Audrey Flack. Following Alvin Martin's characterization, these artists attempted to transcribe the maximum amount of visual information that could be extracted from subject matter, and to do it with an attitude of distance or detachment. By the early 1970's, Richard Estes had moved to the fore among this group, joined by a host of talented artists, among them Don Eddy, Richard Cottingham, Ben Schonzeit and the still-life painter Idelle Weber. The recognition that accompanied this movement was as swift as a flash flood, and names were sought to encompass accurately its several tendencies. The first exhibition, organized by Linda Nochlin in 1968 at Vassar, was entitled *Realism Now,* and it was followed the same year by the Milwaukee Art Center's *Aspects of a New Realism.* Although only a year after Walter Murch's death, he was in neither show, nor was he included in those that followed. In 1970, the Whitney recognized the breadth of the activity with *22 Realists.* Trying to be more precise, in 1971 the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art came up with *Radical Realism,* while the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1972 used the title *Sharp Focus Realism.* By the middle of the decade, the new

tendency had spread throughout the world, known in Europe and even the Middle East as Hyper Realism. The Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art had opened in 1977 with an exhibition in which the largest contingent of paintings by far participated in this tendency: photo-realism or close focus realism.

In the decade following Walter Murch's death, the art situation in the world had entirely shifted from a preponderance of abstraction to one of realism. Using Martin's definition (*American Realism,* p. 132), if the realist is first of all an empiricist who wants to perceive, comprehend and explain the things and events of the nominal world, then Walter Murch — by the terms that emerged after he was gone — was not a realist. "For the realist, the subjects of the work are of primary importance." (Martin, p. 132) This was not the case for the mature Walter Murch.

Confining comparisons only to those realists who were chiefly interested in still-life, this point can be readily demonstrated, and along with it one will be able to see how the "new" realism led quickly into the webs of tradition, reviving and reexploring the modes of much earlier western art. A flower still-life by Audrey Flack, for example, recalls the favorite conceits of seventeenth-century Dutch or Flemish flower painting, where the relationships among the things perceived lead the viewer to complete a narrative program by considering the allegorical implications of flowers or fruits in various stages of life: budding, blooming, or beginning to decay.

In Idelle Weber, the closely painted, carefully observed, odd-angle viewed renderings in the uncertain space of the gutters of the Brooklyn Terminal spun an utterly contemporary narrative of waste, decay and rottenness. In Janet Fish, the seventeenth and eighteeth-century devices of visual metaphor are even clearer: she would, for example, compare flowers freshly bought and still wrapped in paper confines with other flowers already playing out their brief ornamental role in a pitcher. Still younger artists like Carolyn Brady become even more narrative: flowers in a glass pitcher are contrasted with the semi-abstracted flower-derived patterns on a tablecloth, or in the mode of the eighteenth century, compared to the stylized growth patterns on a ceramic bowl.

As the realist movement spread among the new still-life painters and the sense of the broken, common or banal object was replaced gradually by the complete, speaking of an atmosphere of culture and the good life — as in John Stuart Ingle — symbolism reemerged along with textures, the playing off of fruit against porcelain, of metals like silver against the fragility of shells.

By the 1980's, still-life realism among artists like Sally Sturman or Tomar Levine

had become frankly programmatic, narrative, storytelling. There is no way in which it cannot be accurately described as "anecdotal" in the sense that this word summarizes the particularity that the early modernists of the twentieth century strove to expunge from their work.

All of these recent still-life paintings are confrontational. In every case there is a kind of face-off, last seen in American art just before the second world war, for example in George Ault's *Corn from Iowa*, 1940, where the corn is so old and each kernel so polished that the cob has produced a surface exactly like the china to which it is compared, thus making the narrative program intensely clear.

In work of the last few years, for example in Mary Snowden's *Jersey Pears*, 1982 (Jans Collection, Martin, p. 159), the pears are clustered against the edge of a cage-like carrying basket of metal bars, contrasted with the mechanically designed representation of clouds blowing freely through a blue sky, and against even a once wild flower in a pitcher. In Sondra Freckelton, the cabbages have already been partially eaten by bugs while a kitchen towel with its artificially represented pattern of printed flowers, is free from decay.

If the vast majority of the very recent still-life painters seem to have slipped rather swiftly via dramatic confrontation into the ancient veins of storytelling, as have Mary Ann Currier and Paul Linfanti, even the stronger and earlier realist artists have not avoided this trap, although painters like Botero and Martha Erlebacher, by their comparative restraint demonstrate a sensitive awareness of the dangers of over-clarity. Erlebacher, for example, in *Still Life Supreme* placed fifteen different kinds of vegetables and fruits in relative isolation on a striped table cloth against a background of a chevron painting borrowed from Kenneth Noland. By the selection and arrangements — five different kinds of apples, potatoes, a lime, lemon, pear, pepper, onion, orange, and a cloth striped like another kind of Noland painting, she raised the ante to a contemplation of different kinds of 1970's art. Botero, by the size, plasticity and utter simplicity of his enormous fruits (in the mid-60's — not those later ones covered with flies) projects comparisons with the sensual, even sexual relationships of humans.

Perhaps the most abstract of the new realist painters — abstract in the sense of the concentrated high level of his ideas — is William Bailey, who, like Morandi, often invents the shapes of his still-life objects rather than taking them from among givens in either the world of nature or manmade objects. Yet even Bailey, whose work along with that of Louisa Matthiasdottir, Don Eddy, and Sylvia Plimack Mangold, Murch surely

would have admired, is not free from an element of program. When Bailey distributes a group of his containers on top of a table or ranges them along a shelf, he obliges us to confront their qualities as shapes and related colors. They are variously wide or bulging, tall or lean, elegant or common. Thus each shape manifests a particular personality, sometimes hidden by an overlap that forces the observer to come to grips with its particular quality, whether it is ceramic or metal, hard paste or soft, or absorbent. Each color, like each texture, contributes to a particular personality and so the whole emerges: a veritable inventory of familiar types. The heart of the painting is in the dialogue established among the members of the group.

In contrast, Murch seldom painted groups of things. By the early 1950's his predilection for the solitary, isolated object had become the general rule, all parts subservient to the whole. On the well-known *Motor* of 1951, there is an egg and a fragment of stone; as well, the motor is raised on two stone blocks, but the parts are not encouraged to have different personalities, to talk to each other. In fact, as many noted in the 50's and 60's, were it not for the titles, usually bestowed by Barnett Newman or Betty Parsons (see Robbins, Walter Murch, 1966, n.p.) the identification of these objects as *Sewing Machine* (1953) or *Car Lock* (1962) or *Transformer* (1965) would not become an issue of importance. *Stone Jacket* of 1962 is the transformation of an object to another realm of consciousness altogether. It is only because its source as a jacket remains in the title and the distantly recognizable — once familiar — forms of pocket or sleeve or lapel, that we can be reminded of a depature point prior to transcendentalization. Nothing of the ordinary realm of life remains. The point may be made clearer by comparing *Stone Jacket* with Joseph Beuys sculpture *Felt Jacket* or Jasper Johns drawing or lithograph *Coat Hanger*. The Beuys resolutely, doggedly asserts its human quality, while the Johns equivocably alternates between the use factor of the wire clothes hanger and his capacity to turn it into design. The Murch jacket, however, is transubstantiated. In painting after drawing after painting, *Wig Forms* (1964), *Broken Rock* (1964), *Stone Capital* (1965), *Bread and Cloth* (1965), *Air Filter* (1966), Murch isolated the objects and blocked the possibility of narrative program or even association, while all the time acknowledging the source of the objects' strange power to be transformed from the world of everyday.

Murch performed these small metaphysical miracles — as has often been noted (perhaps best by Cleve Gray in "Walter Murch, Modern Alchemist" in *Art in America,* vol. 53, no. 3, 1963, pp. 80-85) — by "an almost alchemical blend of mixed media to achieve his rich, painterly, translucent surfaces." (Martin, p. 156).

Murch, like Chardin in the 18th century never stressed the individual, particular textures of things, but even more than the Chardin whom he admired, and from whom he learned so much, he eschewed narrative implications. In my 1966 essay on Murch I described the creation of the painting *Bread and Cloth,* 1965, having had the benefit of discussing it at length with the artist.

> Many years before, Murch had made a painting of bread and cloth (1948, Joslyn Museum, Murch 1966 cat # 21) and after forgetting about it, a new impulse to do bread had developed in his mind for several years. He recalls that an expression, almost a chant, possibly a note from student days "Chardin's bread" went round his head for months. He made a little sketch long before he finally went out and purchased eight loaves of bread. Why eight loaves? In order to begin with a perfect, or near perfect, uncut loaf. It was surprising how different each was, for, removed from their wrappers one had a sag, another a slope, another a dent in the heel. He wanted one that had risen evenly ... in order to see the bread as a solid rectangular form with a curved top, in order that its color be stronger. ... The hard work in the painting was the establishment of the form in the space that was created in the painting, and since each painting has a different space, a different set of problems, Murch (said) that the one and only constant problem is, 'can it be done?' What had he hoped for when he began *Bread and Cloth?* 'To make a miraculous loaf of bread, a loaf that wasn't bread,' he acknowledged. Did he succeed? ...

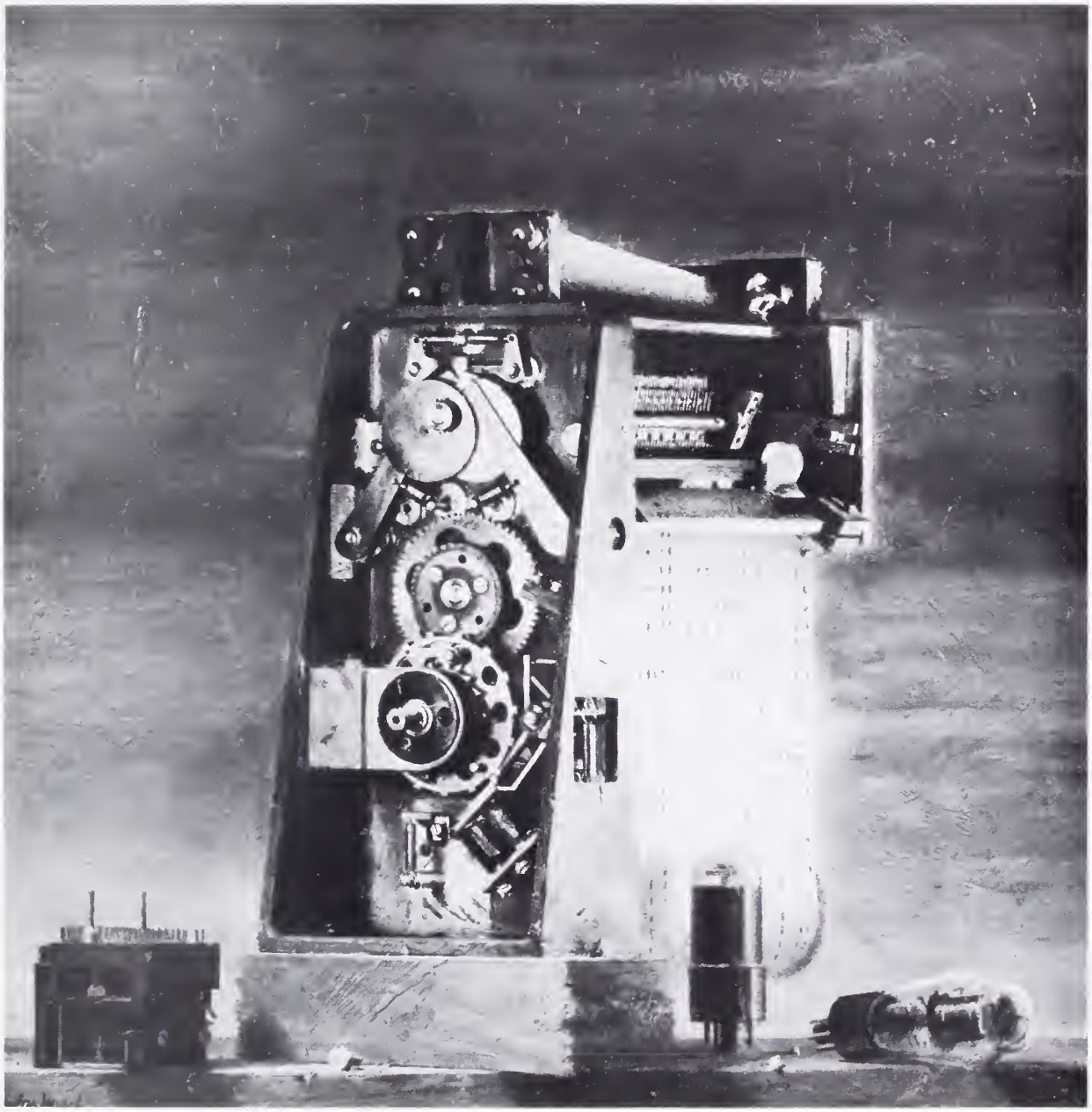
One may properly compare *Bread and Cloth,* 1965, with the very Chardin that was Murch's conscious point of his historical departure, the well-known *Still Life, A Dessert,* of about 1738. We will see that Chardin has become the true inspiration for many of the best of the new realist painters who followed after Walter Murch, for Chardin painted a wonderful, freshly baked brioche and into its crown he stuck a small sprig of flowers, painted in the same evenly textured rich paint scheme. Beside it, still without acknowledging the different textures of surfaces borrowed from things actually seen, he juxtaposed a covered china pot, it too crowned with a handle shaped like a flower. This tour-de-force of 18th century French decorative artificiality is no less or more marvelous than the somewhat humbler baked bread decorated to make an attractive dessert. The simile, however, launches a subtle narrative program. Walter Murch, during his mature years, was not interested in that degree of anecdote, modest and reticent though it is, anecdote raised even to the level of an engaging universal. Like his contemporaries the Abstract Expressionists, he was aiming for an inward, metaphysical, highly individual transformation of pure feeling.

Then, as he was often asked during the last years of his life, why was he not an abstract painter? Why did he find it necessary always to depart from real objects?

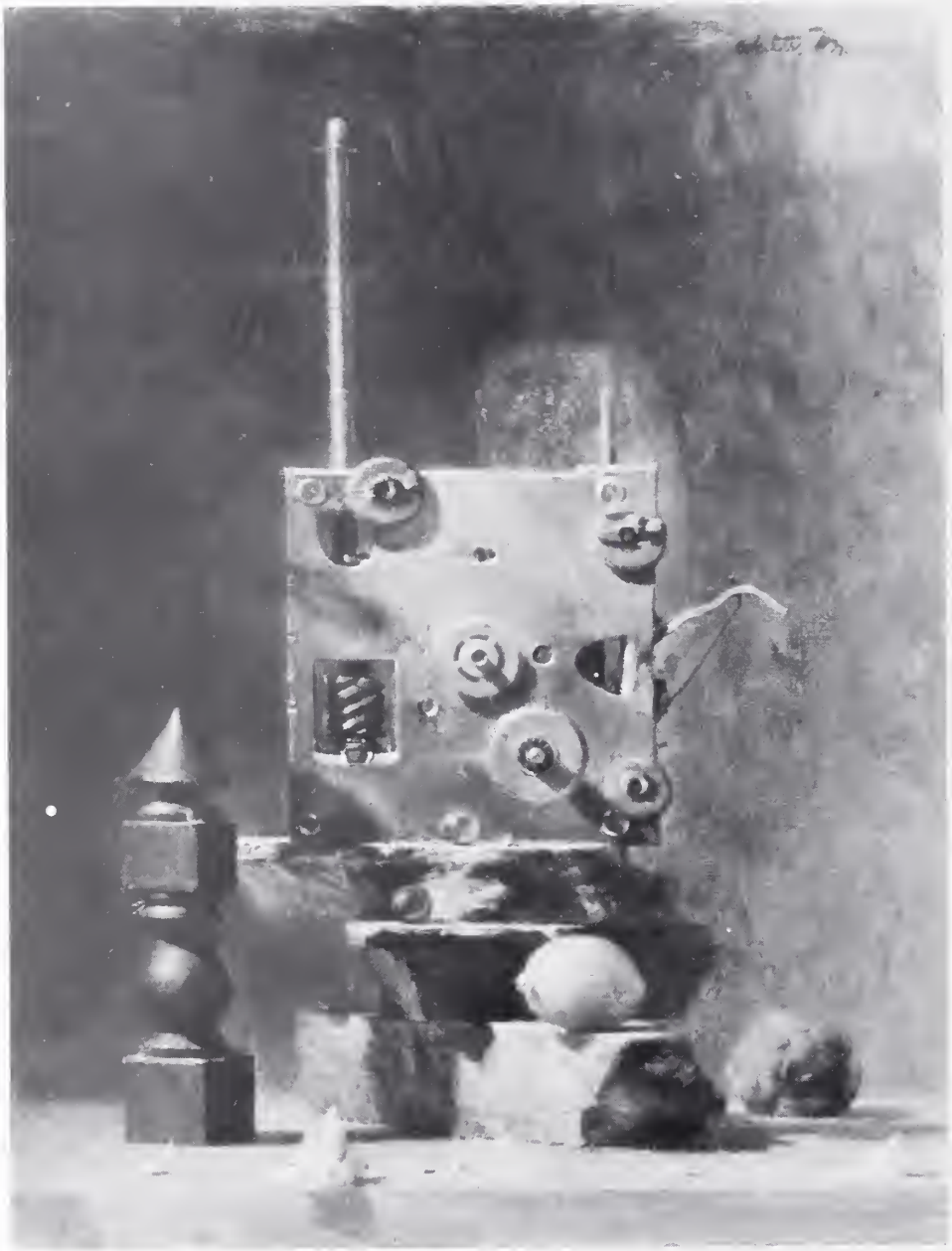
His son, the film-maker and composer, Walter Scott Murch, perhaps the painter's closest follower, supplied the answer with the following story:

One night in the late 1950's, before young Walter had gone off to college, he recalls that his father attended a lecture at the American Academy, Institute of Arts and Letters on upper Broadway. The lecture was by Robert Graves, and Walter senior returned to the family's Riverside Drive apartment filled with excitement because, he said, Robert Graves had talked about precisely what he — Walter Tandy Murch — tried to accomplish in his painting. Walter junior, tried to remember the word his father pronounced over and over, some word like "Baraka," or "Baraga." According to Walter junior interpreting Walter senior retelling Graves, it meant that quality of astonishment imparted to the most ordinary of objects by a mysterious capacity to carry the sense of wonder achieved for those who used them, either knowingly or not. These objects had acquired a spiritual dimension by virtue of condition and use. Humanity had rubbed off on the objects. What was left was a spiritual or magical residue, having nothing to do with function or story.

Young Walter recalls that his father told me that Graves' word was of Celtic orgin. Searching for the term that Walter senior brought home from Graves to his son, it might have been "Baragouin" from the Breton "Bara" (bread) and "gwin" (wine), in reference to the astonishment of the Breton soldiers at the sight of white bread, eaten by their Roman enemies. Thus, "Baraigne" became adopted into the French language to mean something so altered as to become a miraculous transformation. It was Walter Murch's peculiar ability to transform only certain objects into this quality of wonderment, that level of existence that subsumes use value and surpasses even poetic metaphor. Such objects can only be referred to as Murch-objects, and we may be grateful that before he died late in the fall of 1967, he left the world with almost four hundred of them.

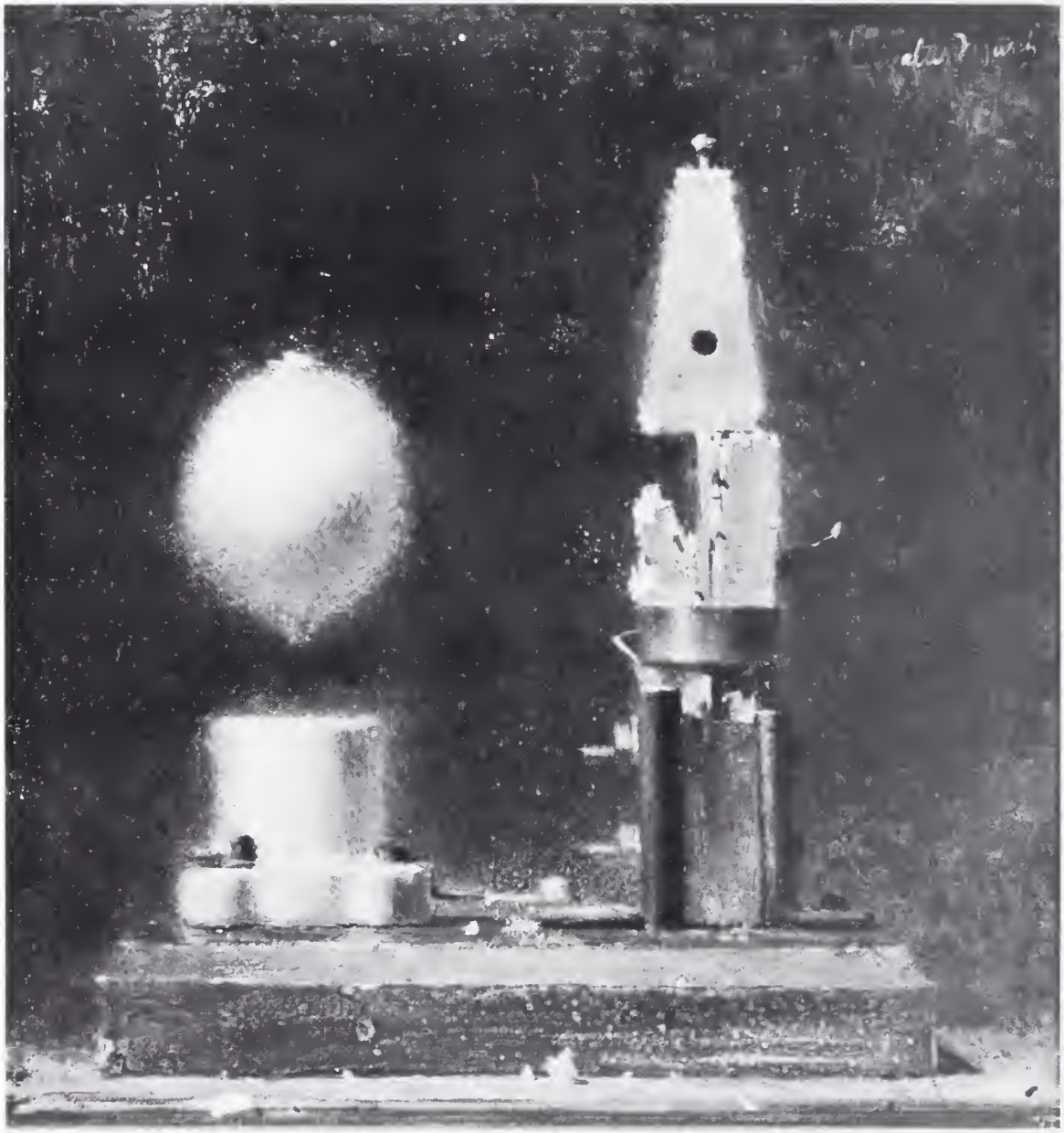


The Calculator, 1949, oil on canvas mounted board, 20 x 20". Collection of IBM Corporation, Armonk, New York. Photo: Geoffrey Clements

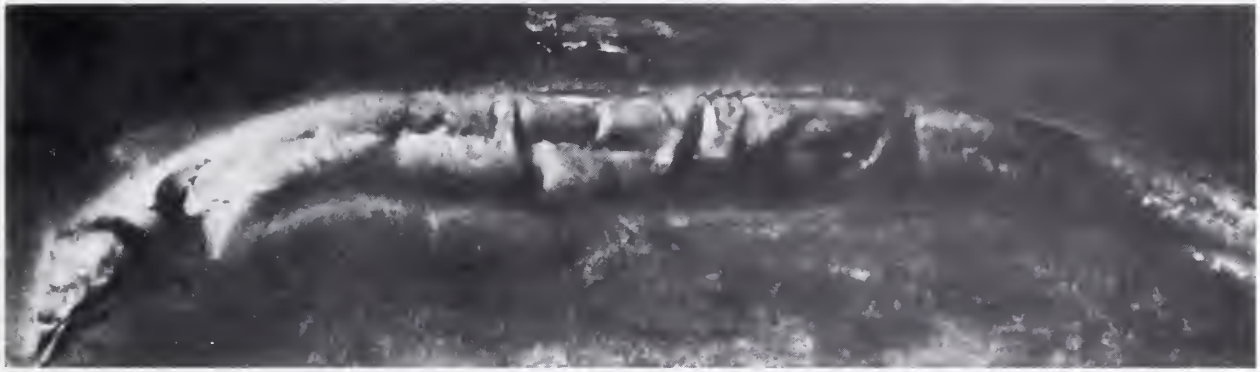


Medley, 1950-51, oil on canvas, 26 5/8 x 20''. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest. Acq. # 77.1.35. Photo: Geoffrey Clements

Geometric Shapes in Landscape, 1951-52, oil on board, 18 x 22 1/4''. Collection of Edward R. Downe, Jr., New York. Photo: Oliver Baker



Taking Off, 1952, oil on academy board, 16 1/8 x 16''. Lent by the Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio



Cooked Eel, 1953, oil on cardboard, 12 3/8 x 15 1/4". Estate of the artist

Cooked Eel (detail)

Red Cabbage, 1956, oil on cardboard, 18 3/8 x 15 1/4". Collection of Edward R. Downe, Jr., New York. Photo: Noel Rowe

Cut Stone, 1960, oil on canvas, 22 x 15". Collection of Walter S. Murch, Bolinas, California

Moon Rock, 1961, oil on canvas, 22 3/4 x 32". Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of the Ford Foundation Purchase Program. Acq. # 62.12. Photo: Geoffrey Clements

Clock Face, 1962, oil on canvas mounted board, 24 x 18". National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc., Washington, D.C.

Teapot, 1962, watercolor on paper, 28 3/4 x 22". Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Charles Simon. Acq. # 78.105

Brooklyn — Architectural Fragment, 1964, watercolor on paper, 29 x 32". Chase Manhattan Bank, New York. Photo: Jan Jachniewicz

Wig Forms, 1964, mixed media on paper, 40 x 26". Collection of Andrew Crispo, New York. Photo: Robert G. Van Wagner

Grey Melon, 1965, mixed media on paper, 19 x 15 1/8". Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island; Gift of Mrs. Murray S. Danforth

CHRONOLOGY

1907	Born Walter Tandy Murch, August 17 in Toronto, Canada, to Clara Louise Tandy, a pianist and Walter Murch, a jewelry shop keeper.
1916	Began to study the violin and continued to do so for fifteen years.
1922-23	Attended Toronto Conservatory of Music.
1925-27	Enrolled in the Ontario College of Art. Three of his teachers, namely Lauren Harris, Arthur Lismer and J.E.H. MacDonald were from the Canadian artsts' group known as The Seven. Their work was distinguished by an expressionistic manner.
1927	Visited New York City that summer, took a job as a stained glass designer and decided to remain in the city.
1927-29	Registered for classes at the Art Students League and in 1928-29, at Grand Central School where his instructor was Arshile Gorky. When Gorky left Grand Central, Murch studied privately with him for two years and remained friendly with him. During this time he lived and taught classes himself at Cristodoro House having his first one person show there in 1929, and he established a reputation in the commercial area as an illustrator.
1930	Married Katharine Scott whom he had become acquainted with at Cristodoro House.
early 30s	Began to concentrate on still life in his work and was interested in the work of Cézanne and that of Maurice Sterne.
1933	Employed as a designer at Lord and Taylor, working for this department store for about sixteen years.
1934	Spent July and August painting in Taxco, Mexico.
1936	Met Betty Parson. Also encountered Raymond Lowey and started freelance work as a commercial artist.
late 30s	Frequented the Julien Levy and Brummer galleries where he saw work by Surrealist artists and became acquainted with Levy and Joseph Cornell. He saw Cornell for about the next five or six years, and Cornell gave him snapshots and objects that he used in his work. At this time, he was particularly interested in the work of Pierre Roy.
early 40s	Increasingly admired work by "Old Master" painters, especially Rembrandt, Vermeer and Chardin. His love for the work of Chardin continued throughout his career.

1941	First one person show at Betty Parson's Wakefield Gallery. In this exhibition was "Self-Portrait (W.T.M.)", 1940; the show was given favorable reviews. About this time, he began to use mechanical objects as subjects in his work. Through his association with Parsons, he met Barnett Newman, Theodore Stamos, Mark Rothko and Clifford Still.
1943	First child, Walter Scott Murch was born.
1944	Represented in a group show at Mortimer Brandt Gallery. A *New York Times* critic noted a resemblance between Murch's work and that of Roy.
1947	Second one person show at Betty Parsons Gallery. Commissioned to paint *Clocks* cover illustration of *Fortune* magazine.
1948	Contracted by Betty Parsons and Lynne Thompson to devote full time to painting non-commercially for one year. Became a United States citizen and a daughter, Louise Tandy Murch, was born.
1949	Completed paintings for covers of *Scientic American* (and continued to work for the magazine until 1961) and the corporate reports for the Celanese Corporation of America. In addition, he expanded his work for *Fortune*. Due to his success as a commercial artist, he was able to move to a larger apartment that afforded him a better studio space.
1950	Received Art Directors (Philadelphia) Award and commenced work with the Perkins and Lavaty artists' agency, an association kept to 1963. In this year he was also hired to teach an evening course at Pratt Institute; he continued to receive teaching contracts through 1958. Noteworthy is the fact that in the Pratt 1957-58 catalogue, he was called, "Instructor in Pictorial Object Drawing".
1951	About this time, he noticed some old peeling wallpaper in an abandoned New Hampshire inn; years later he chose to work on wallpaper as a ground for imagery. He received gold medals from the Art Directors Clubs of New York and Philadelphia for work he completed for First National City Bank and *Fortune* magazine.
1952	He expressed greater interest in incorporating "accidents" and

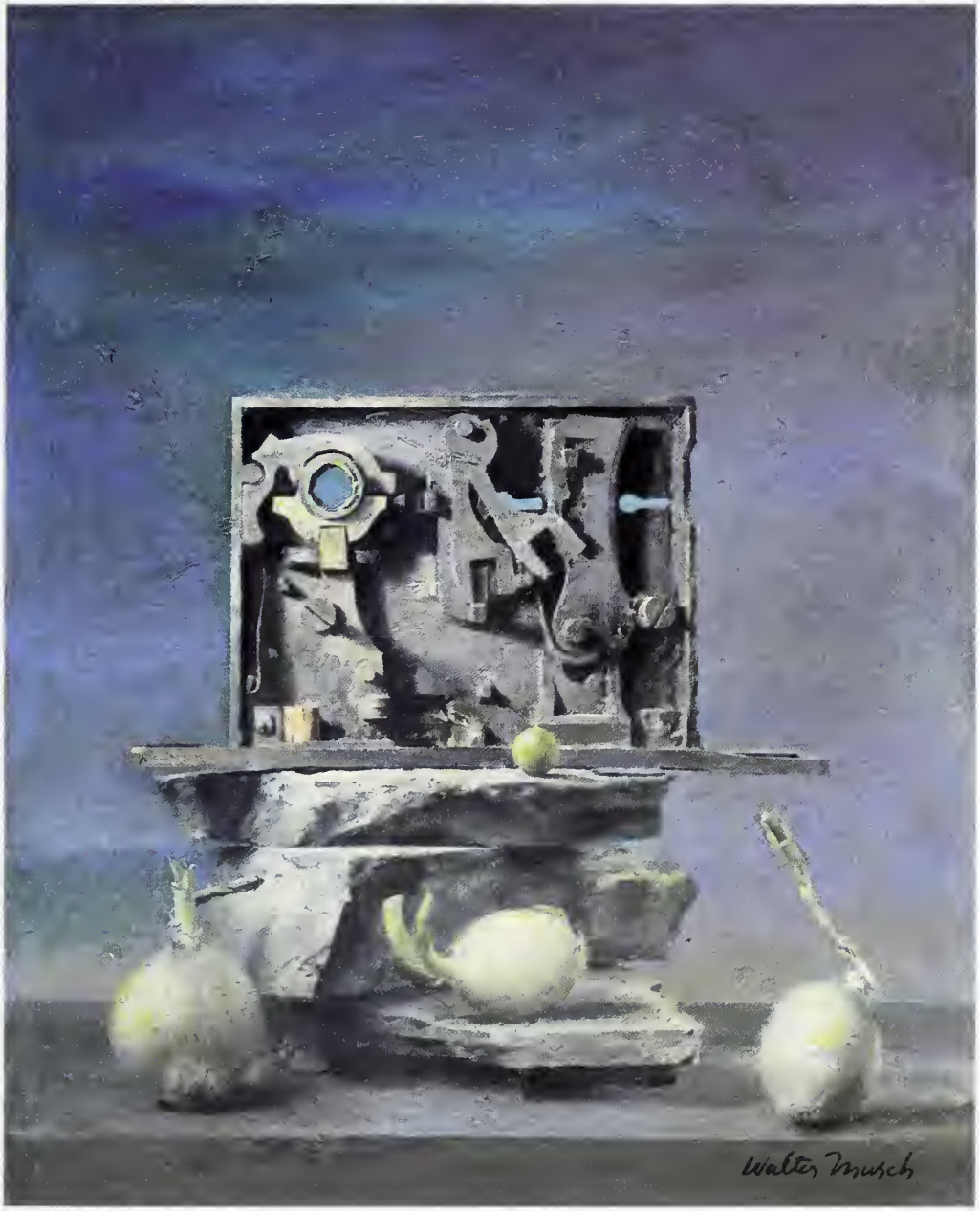
Still Life with Red Ribbon, 1945, oil on canvas board, 14 3/4 x 15 1/4". Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York

Metronome, 1946, oil on canvas, 21 1/4 x 15 1/4''. Collection of Mr. & Mrs. Allen Grover, New York

	chance effects into the art work. Continued to paint pictures for advertisements for First National City Bank through 1958.
1953	Given New York City Art Directors Award.
1954	Painted *The Ledge* of an underside of a molding fragment. This was the first of works dealing with architectural elements. His interest may have been inspired by the fact that his maternal grandfather carved architectural elements and pointed them out to his young grandson. Murch worked for *Vogue* magazine from 1954 to 1963.
1956	Commissions included those from Union Carbide and Carbon Corporation, New York and the *New York Times* magazine and *Book Review*. (The latter association was extended through 1964.)
1957	Murch's one person exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery was favorably and perceptively reviewed by Carlyle Burrows for the *New York Herald Tribune* and by Stuart Preston writing in *The New York Times*.
1958	Invited to Yaddo, an artists' organization.
1958-59	Commissioned by *Modern Packaging* for a series of ten oil paintings to be used as covers.
1959	Awarded a gold medal by Society of Illustrators of New York City.
1959-60	Asked to be part of a committee to decide fellowships in painting for the Institute of International Education, the Fulbright Program.
1959-61	Employed full time as an instructor at Pratt.
1961	Hired part-time by New York University. Appointed Associate Professor of drawing and painting at Boston University; remained at this post to 1967. Received a $1500 award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters and was asked to serve as Chairman for the Institute of International Education's Screening Committee on Fulbright Awards in painting and graphic arts for 1962-63. Invited again to Yaddo. At this point, Murch concentrated more on works on paper, and in the early sixties he was especially concerned with the writings of Albert Camus and Aldous Huxley.

1962	Honored with a Ford Foundation Purchase prize.
1963	Even in these later years, Murch spoke of the continuing influence of Gorky on his work. He was elected a member of the Yaddo Corporation and painted *Midnight Portrait of Silver* for *Vogue*.
1963-64	Read Huxley's *Doors of Perception: Heaven and Hell,* and termed it a "revelation".
1964	Invited to be a visiting artist at Skowhegan, where he presented a lecture. He was appointed "Lecturer in Art" at Columbia University, a position he held until 1964, and he served as artist-in-residence at the Huntington Galleries, Huntington, West Virginia under the auspices of a Ford Foundation Grant.
1965	Received invitation to take part in visiting artists' program at Dartmouth College. Named fellowship juror of Yaddo Corporation and member of the Board of Governors, Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. Selected for Portfolio of Drawings, *Art in America*.
1966	Retrospective exhibition opened at Rhode Island School of Design; it subsequently traveled to other institutions. Began Dartmouth residency; asked along with de Kooning to be part of jury to select Fellows in Painting for 1967 by the American Academy in Rome; lectured at Skowhegan where he was part of the faculty; and served on the Painting Committee for the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation, New York.
1967	Notified of a Guggenheim Fellowship award in "Creative Painting and Drawing" for 1967-68; had to postpone to 1968. Retrospective appeared at the Brooklyn Museum. Taught and lectured at Skowhegan. Died of heart attack, December 11 at the River Club in New York, after giving a speech to supporters of the Skowhegan art school.

Winter Palace, c. 1946, oil on panel, 15 x 20''. The Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts



The Lock, 1948, oil on canvas, 22 x 18''. Private Collection

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

ONE PERSON

1929 Christodora House, New York. *Watercolors and Drawings by Mr. Walter Tandy Murch.*
1941 Wakefield Gallery, New York. *Walter Tandy Murch: Paintings.*
1947 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. *Walter Tandy Murch Paintigns.*
1949 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. *Walter Murch: Recent Paintings.*
1951 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. *Walter Murch: Recent Paintings.*
1953 Allan Frumkin Gallery, Chicago. *Walter Murch: Paintings and Drawings.*
1954 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. *Walter Murch: Recent Paintings.*
1956 Worth Avenue Gallery, Palm Beach, Florida. *Walter Murch.*
The Hampton Gallery, Amagansett, Long Island. *Walter Murch.*
1957 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. *Paintings by Walter Murch.*
1959 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. *Paintings by Walter Murch.*
1962 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. *Walter Murch.*
1964 Museum of the City of Huntington, West Virginia. *Walter Murch.*
1966 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. *Walter Murch.*
Beaumont-May Gallery, The Hopkins Center, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire. *Walter Murch, Visiting Artist.*
Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. *Walter Murch.*
Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence. *Walter Murch* (Retrospective).
1970 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. *Walter Murch.*
1971 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. *Walter Murch.*
1976 Galerie Jan Krugier, Geneva, Switzerland.
1978 The Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, New Jersey. *The Alchemy of Walter Murch.*
1983 Jack Tilton Gallery, New York.

GROUP

1942 Wakefield Gallery, New York.
1944 Mortimer Brandt Gallery, New York.

1945 The Art Institute of Chicago. *The Fifty-sixth Annual American Exhibition of Paintings.* (1951, 1954, 1957, 1961, 1963)
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.c. *Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Oil Paintings.* (1947, 1949, 1951, 1953, 1957, 1959, 1961, 1963)
Mortimer Brandt Gallery, New York. *Portraits of Today by Painters of Today.*
Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. *Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture.* (1946, 1948, 1949, 1952, 1954, 1958, 1960, 1962, 1964, 1966)

1947 The Art Institute of Chicago. *Abstract and Surrealist American Art.*
Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh. Painting in the United States. (1948)

1948 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York.
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. *Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting.* (1950, 1952, 1956, 1960, 1962, 1964, 1966, 1968)

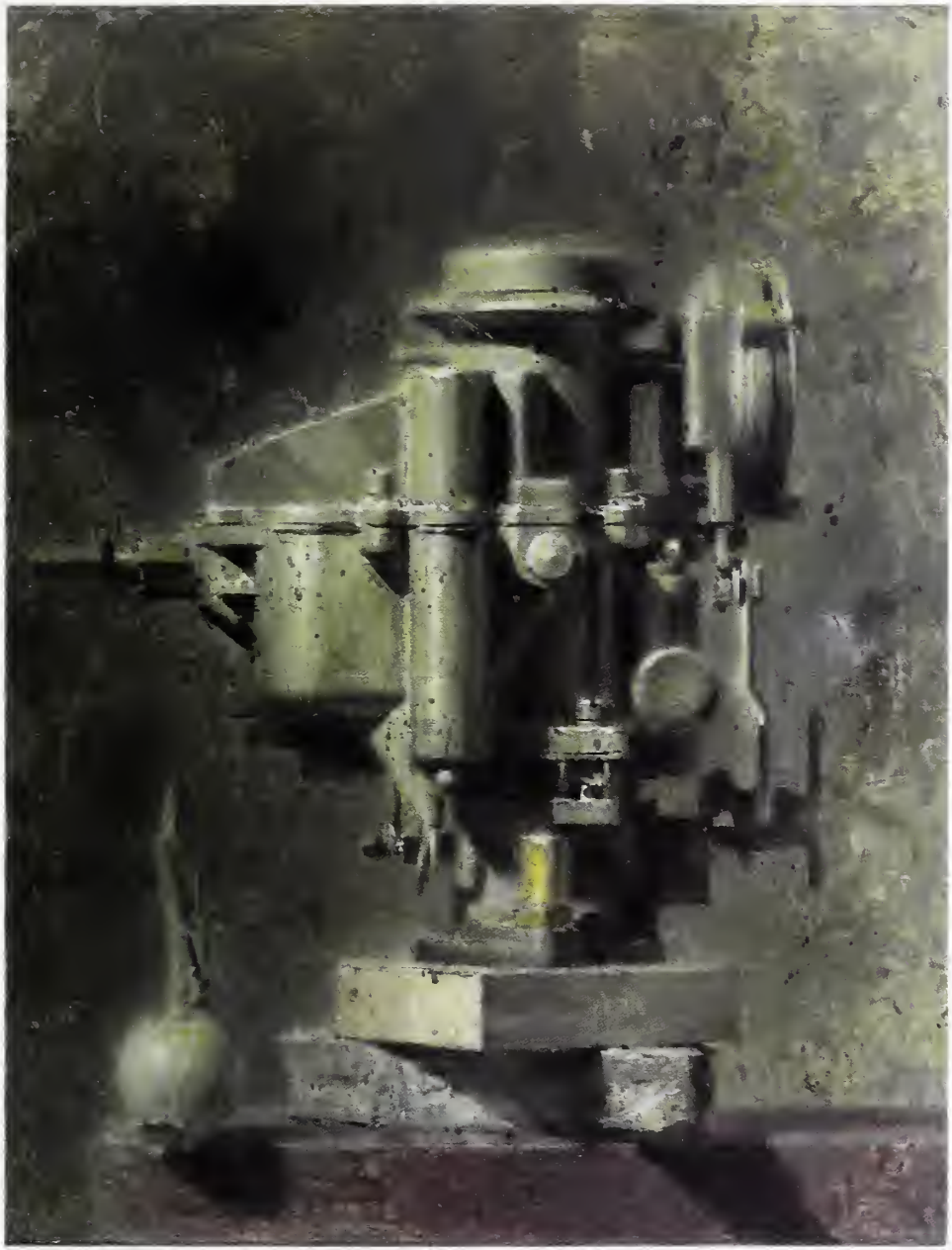
1949 Architecture Building, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois. *Second Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting.* (1951, 1952)
The Art Gallery of Toronto, Canada. *Contemporary Paintings from Great Britain, the United States and France, with Sculpture from the United States.*
The Toledo Museum, Ohio.

1950 Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, Colorado Springs. *New Accessions, U.S.A.*
Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. *Symbolic Realism in American Painting, 1940-50.*
University Art Galleries, University of Nebraska, Lincoln. *Sixtieth Annual Exhibition of Contemporary Art.* (1952, 1955)

1951 The Brooklyn Museum, New York. *Revolution and Tradition.*
City Art Museum of St. Louis, Missouri. *Contemporary American Painting.*
Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts. *Contemporary Art in the United States.*

1952 The Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan. *Little Show of Work in Progress: Poetry of the Actual.*

Governor II, 1952, oil on paper over masonite, 40 3/8 x 17 3/4''. Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Wildenstein Benefit Purchase Fund. Acq. # 53.11



Carburetor, 1957, oil on canvas, 32 1/2 x 27 1/2''. Chase Manhattan Bank, New York

Edward Fuller Gallery, New York. *Nine Times a Fish.*
San Francisco Museum of Art, California. *30 United States Contemporaries.*
Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts. *Painter's Choice.*

1953 The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. *The Edward Root Collection.*

1954 Academy Art Gallery, New York. *Exhibition of Works by Candidates for Grants in Art for 1954.* (National Institute of Arts and Letters.)
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts. *Variations ... 3 Centuries of Painting.*
Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. *Drawings 1954.*
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. *American Painting 1754-1954.*
The Toledo Museum of Art, Ohio. *Forty-first Annual Exhibition of Selected American Paintings.*
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. *American Painting 1954.*

1955 American Federation of Arts and *Fortune* magazine. *World of Work: Twenty-five Years of Art for Fortune: 1930-1955.*
John Herron Art Museum, Indianapolis, Indiana. *Contemporary American and European Paintings.*
United States International Association of Plastic Arts. (Traveling Exhibition, 1955-1957.)
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. *The New Decade: 35 American Painters and Sculptors.*

1956 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. *Ten Years.*
Huntington Galleries, Huntington, West Virginia. *Paintings Commissioned by Joy Manufacturing Company.*
Santa Barbara Museum of Art, California. *Illusion and Reality.*
XXVIIIth Venice Biennale, Italy. *American Artists Paint the City* (assembled by Katharine Kuh, Art Institute of Chicago.)

1957 Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut. *Media in Paint and Various Ways of Using Them.*
International Hallmark Exhibition. *Fourth International Hallmark Art Award Exhibition.* Wildenstein Gallery, New York.
Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota. *American Paintings 1945-1957.*
Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York. *Edward Wales Root: 1884-1956, American Collector.*

Pennsylvania State University, University Park. *God-Made Matter and Man-Made Forms.*

1958 Des Moines Art Center, Iowa. *Current Painting Styles and Their Sources.* (Tenth Anniversary Exhibition.)

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. *Friends Loan Exhibtion.*

1959 Allentown Art Museum, Pennsylvania. *Four Centuries of Still Life.*

The Brooklyn Museum, New York. *Twentieth Biennial International Water Color Exhibition.* (1961)

Kresge Art Center, Michigan State University, East Lansing. *The 1959 Purchase Exhibition.*

Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. *The American Scene in One Hundred Fifty Years of American Art.*

1960 The Brooklyn Museum, New York. *Brooklyn and Long Island Artists.*

Milwaukee Art Center, Wisconsin. *American Painting 1760-1960. Twenty-five Paintings from the Fleischman Collection.*

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. *Business Buys American Art.*

1961 Chautauqua Art Association, New York. *Fifteen American Painters.* (From the Albright Collection)

New School for Social Research, New York. *The Creative Process.*

The New School for Social Research, New York. *Fifteen Contemporary Artists.*

Pennsylvania Academy of The Fine Arts, Philadelphia. *The Lambert Collection.*

Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York and Albany Institute of History and Art. *Contemporary American Realistic Paintings.*

University of Buffalo, New York.

University of Illinois, Urbana. *Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture.* (1963).

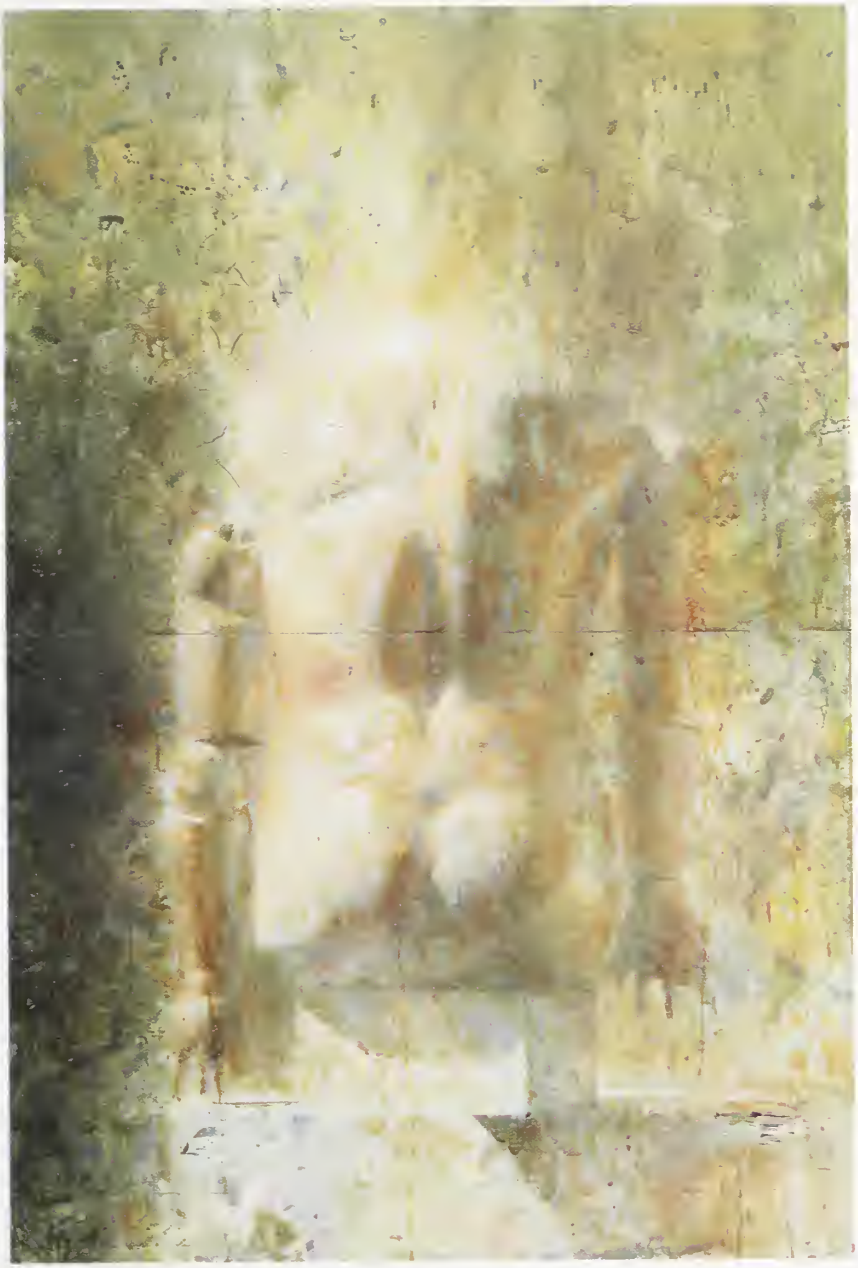
1962 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. *Vision and Division: A Show-Down Exhibition.*

Cleveland Museum, Ohio. *Subject Matter in Contemporary Art.*

Detroit Institute of Art, Michigan. *American Paintings and Drawings from Michigan Collections.*

Milwaukee Art Center, Wisconsin. *One Hundred and Two American Artists.* The Johnson Collection. (Traveled 1962-65.)

Sphere and Cloth Study, 1964, mixed media on wallpaper, 19 1/4 x 16 1/2''. Collection of Frank Picarello, Jr., Wood-Ridge, New Jersey



Enlarged Doll, 1965, oil on canvas, 48 x 32''. Estate of the artist

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. *American Painting, 1962.*

1963 *Art: U.S.A. Now.* The S.C. Johnson and Son, Inc. Collection sponsored abroad by USIA. (Traveled 1963-1967.)

The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio. *28th National Annual Midyear Show.*

Centre Culturel Américain, Paris. *From A to Z 1963: Thirty-one American Artists.*

IBM Gallery, New York. *Realism: An American Heritage.* (Traveled)

Jerrold Morris Gallery, Toronto. *The Art of Things.*

The Roswell Museum and Art Center, New Mexico. *Sterne, Murch, Liberman.*

1964 Betty Parsons Gallery, New York. *The Painter's Eye.*

Boston Architectural Center, Massachusetts. (Exhibition and auction to raise funds for legal fees for Highlander-Maryville Case, organized by Gyorgy Kepes.)

The Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester, New York. *In Focus: A Look at Realism in Art.*

Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. *The 1964 Pittsburgh International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture.* (1968)

New York World's Fair, Pavilion of Fine Arts, New York. *American Art Today.*

Pennsylvania Academy of The Fine Arts, Philadelphia. *Small Paintings of Large Import from the Collection of Lawrence A. and Barbara Fleischman of Detroit, Michigan.*

Silvermine Guild of Artists, Hayes Hall, New Canaan, Connecticut. *Realist Painting Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow.*

1965 Albion College, Michigan. *The Eye Looks Inward and Outward.* (From the Art Institute of Chicago, The Detroit Institute of Art and The Toledo Museum of Art.)

American Federation of Arts. *The Drawing Society National Exhibition.* (Traveled)

American Paintings from the Bloedel Collection. (Circulated by the Art Council of Great Britain.)

Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan. *Forty Key Artists of the Mid-Twentieth*

Century.

Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, West Kitchener, Ontario. *Contemporary American Painters.*

Milwaukee Art Center, Wisconsin. *Pop Art and the American Tradition.*

Museum of Art, Science and Industry, Bridgeport, Connecticut. *The Machine in Art.*

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. *Decade of American Drawings.*

1966 The Cincinnati Art Museum, Ohio. *American Painting.*

Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts. *Art for United States Embassies.*

Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence. *Recent Still Life.*

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. *Twenty Drawings: New Acquisitions.*

1967 American Federation of Arts. *American Still-Life Painting: 1913-1967.* (Traveled)

American Federation of Arts and the Cultural Affairs Commission of the University of Georgia. *American Painting: the 1940's.* (Traveled)

John Hopkins Institute for Advanced International Study, Baltimore, Maryland.

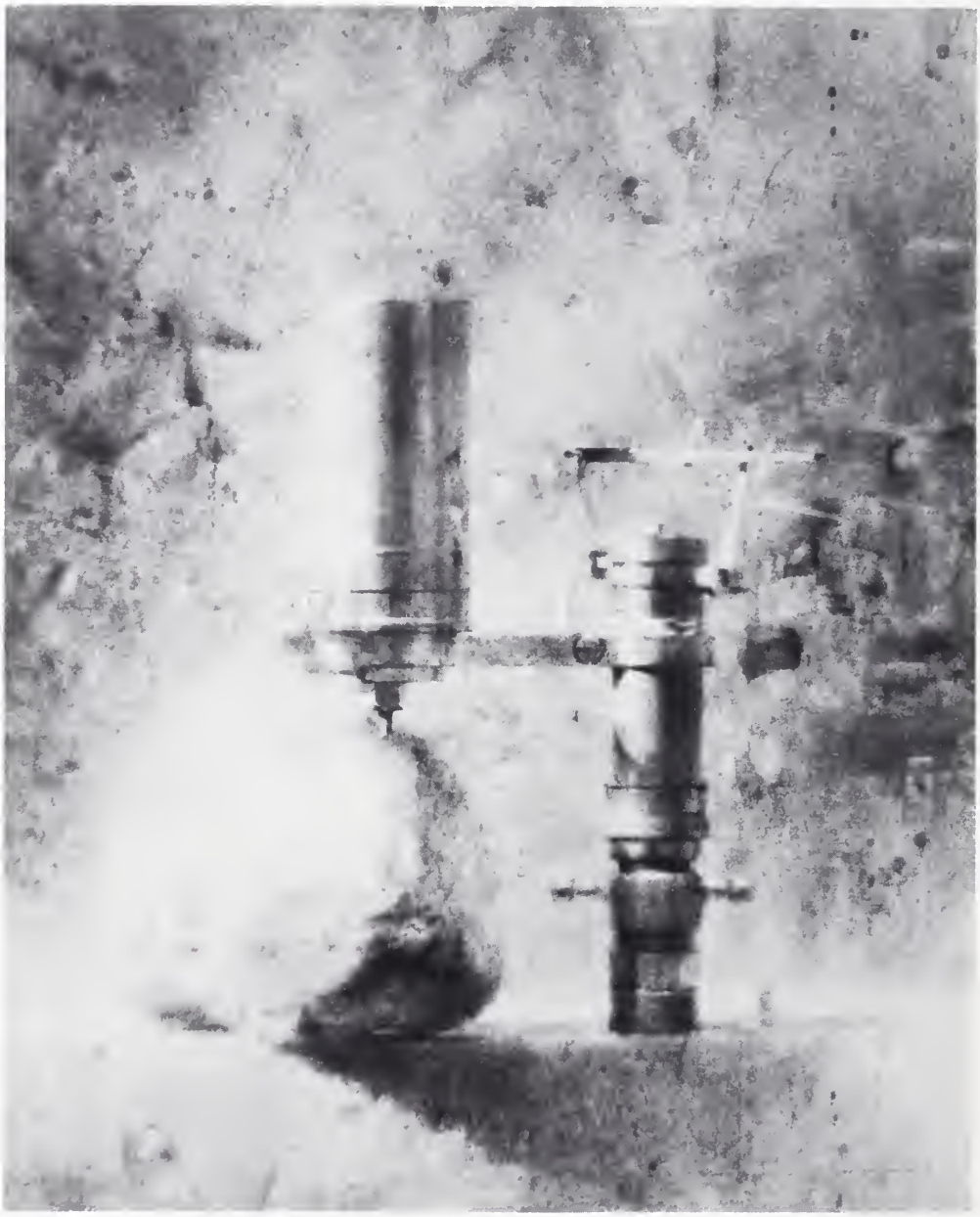
1968 Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, California. *Twentieth Century American Art: San Diego Invitational.*

National Collection for Fine Arts, Washington, D.C.

1969 IBM Gallery, New York. *American Painting 1900-1950.* (Traveled)

Keuka College, Keuka Park, New York. *The Albright-Knox Loan Exhibition.*

1970 Colby College Art Museum, Waterville, Maine. *Twenty-fifth Anniversary Exhibition of the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture: Drawings by the Faculty, Visiting Artists and Alumni.*



Pressure Gauge, 1965, mixed media, 27 3/4 x 21 1/4". Collection of Walter S. Murch, Bolinas, California

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Murch studio with objects. Photo: Robert G. Van Wagner

Walter Murch

ANNOTATED CHECKLIST

PAINTINGS

Self-Portrait (W.T.M.), 1940, oil on board, 14 x 12 1/2". The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; Lambert Fund Purchase.

This painting was shown in Murch's first one person exhibition at Betty Parsons' Wakefield Gallery in 1941. A critic of the time described it as " ... a portrait gazing with wistful curiosity from behind a winding sheet, like a child sneaking a look at Santa." (H. Boswell, *Art Digest*, March 15, 1941)

Monolith of Time, 1941, oil on canvas, 15 x 19". Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford; Gift of Henry Schnakenberg.

In an early example of the artist's selection of machinery as subject, he has painted a clock without its case. Possibly the inspiration was clock or watch mechanisms he had seen as a youth in his father's jewelry shop.

Still Life with Red Ribbon, 1945, oil on canvas board, 14 3/4 x 19", Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York.

At a later date, Murch said regarding this picture that he was interested in an arrangement of objects and textures such as silk, satin, rock, dry leaf and a child's blocks. (Jacobowitz, Interview, 1967) He also reported that a pen case painted in this picture was one of several items given to him by his friend, Joseph Cornell. (Robbins, *Walter Murch*, 1966) Upon completion, the painting was acquired from the artist by Julien Levy and remained in his possession until the time of his death.

Metronome, 1945, oil on canvas, 21 1/4 x 15 1/4". Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Allen Grover, New York.

Murch said later that he raised the metronome with a thin wire to reveal the cast shadow and that while working he painted out the shelf thinking that the suspended position of the object made the painting more interesting. (Jacobowitz, Interview, 1967 and Leona Rubin, *Sunday Standard Times*, New Bedford, Massachusetts, 1966) The work has been quite extensively shown, discussed and reproduced, i.e., The Whitney Museum of American Art's "35 American Painters and Sculptors" exhibition, 1955; James Thrall Soby's *Contemporary Painters*, 1948; *Tiger's Eye*, 1948 and in *Art, U.S.A. Now*, 1962 by Alan Weller.

Winter Palace, c. 1946, oil on panel, 15 x 20''. Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Massachusetts.

The title for the piece was provided by Edward Root, a respected collector. He bought the painting and suggested to Murch that it had a Near Eastern atmosphere.

The Circle, 1948, oil on canvas, 26 x 21 1/2''. The Brooklyn Museum, New York.

Subsequent to completion of the painting, Murch described his discovery of the subject matter, a portable phonograph he had brought with him to New York:

> I opened up a portable phonograph and made a painting of the motor. Now the act, in a sense, of destroying the subject was takiang place the minute I used the screwdriver. It was a phonograph that my father had given me.

Also, he mentioned that he was attracted to "... all sorts of wonderful metal parts inside the cover" and that in a certain type of light, the gleam of a metal surface produced a "hypnotic effect". Well defined areas of light and shade were sympathetic elements to him. (Fortess, Interview, 1966 and Gray, *Art in America,* 1963) The rug underneath the phonograph is indicative of the artist's interest in the work of Vermeer.

The Lock, 1948, oil on canvas, 22 x 18''. Private Collection.

According to Murch, his aim in this work was "... to construct the mechanism in terms of different planes". (Murch, Archives) In comparison to Morton Schamberg's treatment of a similar subject, Murch's picture is more painterly and dramatic due to his rendition of light and shadow effects. Relating Murch's paintings of machinery to those of "Precisionist" artists, John I.H. Baur pointed to the mysterious quality unrelated to function conveyed by Murch as compared to the functionalism implied in pictures by Charles Sheeler. (Baur and Goodrich, *American Art of Our Century,* 1961)

The Calculator, 1949, oil on canvas mounted board, 20 x 20''. Collection of IBM Corporation, Armonk, New York.

In this case, Murch removed the side casing of the object to reveal the interior. The painting was commissioned for the cover of *Scientific American.* Apropos of this picture, a critic remarked that the artist painted "the machine as personage".

(Baur, *Art in America,* 1960)

Medley, 1950-51, oil on canvas, 26 5/8 x 20''. The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest. 77.1.35.

Typically, the artist associated natural with manmade objects and often kept them around his studio. He noted:

> I have a ten-year-old loaf of bread, I have a fifteen-year-old lemon, I have a pear twelve, grapefruit or course that goes back very far indeed. (Murch, Skowhegan lecture, 1964)

At one point, the Art Council of Great Britain circulated the painting as part of an exhibition, ''American Paintings from the Lawrence Bloedel Collection''.

The Bulb, 1951, oil on canvas, 21 x 17''. Collection of Edward R. Downe, Jr., New York.

Augmenting Murch's unusual choice of a light bulb, is his poetic rendition of it. The bulb appears to be lit even through it is not connected to an energy source. The luminous effect of the bulb casts a magical effect. Formerly, the painting belonged to the Sara Roby Foundation Collection, (administered by the American Federation of Arts) acquired by them in 1956.

Geometric Shapes in Landscape, 1951-52, oil on board, 18 x 22 1/4''. Collection of Edward R. Downe, Jr., New York.

This piece, originally owned until the time of her death by Betty Parsons, was exhibited in ''Thirty United States Contemporaries'', traveled by the American Federation of the Arts, 1952-53. Of interest is Murch's pick of simple geometric forms to arrange along a horizontal plane.A pyramid cantilevered from a cube at right contributes to a Surrealist aura of wonder.

Governor II, 1952, oil on paper over masonite, 40 3/8 x 17 3/4''. The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Purchase, with funds from the Wildenstein Benefit Purchase Fund. 53.111.

In certain instances, the artist's private and commissioned works inspired one another, particularly in terms of utilization of certain objects as subjects. This piece

was preceded by "Automatic Control", a painting completed for *Scientific American* magazine. Acquired by the Whitney Museum in 1953, the picture received considerable attention in the writings of John I.H. Baur. (Baur, *Art in America,* 1954 and 1960 and with Lloyd Goodrich, *American Art of Our Century, 1961)*

Taking Off, 1952, oil on academy board, 16 3/4 x 16". Toledo Museum of Art.

The painting was exhibited in the Toledo Museum's "Forty-first Annual Exhibition of Selected American Paintings" of 1954 and purchased by them that year. Three years later it was included in the Corcoran Gallery's "25th Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Oil Paintings". In this work, Murch seems to have "launched" a lemon, as the fruit is shown at a point in space above other objects on a shelf.

Cooked Eel, 1953, oil on cardboard, 12 3/8 x 39 7/8". Estate of the artist.

Murch purchased this fish, a smoked eel measuring over three feet long, in a delicatessan. To paint it, he placed it on nails at eye level. He said he kept the fish for over a month. Retrospectively, he mentioned that he had wanted to use up a long, narrow piece of material in making a painting. (Shirey, *Newsweek*, 1968 and Jacobowitz, Interview) The fish, here, is suspended across the surface as though caught in pigment.

Red Cabbage, 1956, oil on cardboard, 18 3/8 x 15 1/4". Collection of Edward R. Downe, Jr., New York.

On the "head" of cabbage is balanced a small, plastic ball. The mundane object here is qualified in a humorous manner as it supports an unlikely companion item.

Carburetor, 1957, oil on canvas, 32 1/2 x 27 1/2". Chase Manhattan Bank, New York.

Herein, the artist presents a monumentalized part of an automobil engine, centrally located in the painting. The classical repose of this object is relieved by the precarious position of a foreground onion. The piece appeared in Katharine Kuh's appraisal of the Chase Manhattan Bank collection and in John Canaday's obituary for the artist. (Kuh, *Art in America,* 1960 and Canaday, *The New York Times,* 1967)

Cut Stone, 1960, oil on canvas. 22 x 15''. Collection of Walter S. Murch, Bolinas, California.

The artist employed the geometric forms of blocks in this work, setting them in a typically shallow space. Especially significant is the manner in which he set the broad surface of one block parallel to the picture plane, thereby creating a simple abstract composition.

Moon Rock, 1961, oil on canvas, 21 3/4 x 32''. The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of the Ford Foundation Purchase Program. 62.12.

A single rock is monumentally portrayed here atop a subtly colored rug. The illusion of atmosphere about the rock established through loose application of medium produces an enigmatic mood. The painting was included in the Whitney Museum's ''Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting'', 1961-62, reproduced in the catalogue and acquired by the Museum in 1962.

Clock Face, 1962, oil on canvas mounted board, 24 x 18''. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; Gift of S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc.

The clock ''face'' in this example is hung in a centralized, strictly frontal position just inside the picture plane suggesting this mechanism as an iconic image. The painting was part of ''Art U.S.A. Now'' exhibition of the Johnson Collection that was circulated, 1965-67; it also accompanied Edward R. Murrow's article, ''Why Export Culture?'' in *Art in America,* 1962.

Enlarged Doll, 1965, oil on canvas, 48 x 32''. Estate of the artist.

Originally, the painted doll was one foot in height. Murch enlarged it at every stage because he wanted to make a large painting. Eventually, a second piece of masonite was joined to the first to increase the area of work. Often, he took advantage of fortuitous accidents, incorporating them into the creative process. In this picture, a ring was formed at the upper right by a can of paint that had rested on the canvas.

DRAWINGS

Still Life with Blue Ribbon, 1945, pastel on paper, 12 x 15''. Kennedy Galleries, New York.

Similar in title to a painting of the same year, this relatively early work is indicative of features of the artist's subsequent development, including an idiosyncratic selection of objects, such as a rock, geometric form and machine and his propensity for arranging items frontally along a shallow plane of space paralleling the picture surface. The cone at center lends an air of balance and serenity to the painting.

Mechanism, 1949, wash on paper, 10 1/4 x 12 3/8''. Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York.

This rendition of a machine reflects Murch's interest in linking object with a surrounding environment or atmosphere.

Study with Melon, Onion and Rock, 1961, mixed media on paper, 20 x 27''. Collection of Frank Lavaty, New York.

Disparate subjects appear to materialize and disappear in ''air'' that the artist deliberately established in his work.

Colored Melon, 1962, oil on wallpaper, 15 1/8 x 12 3/4''. The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest. 77.1.36.

Pertinent to this piece, Murch commented:

> In a deserted New Hampshire inn about fifteen years ago, I saw old peeling wallpaper. The textures, paste and bits of plaster sticking to it transported me and I knew I could draw from what had already been started. (Browne, Interview, 1966)

His attitude toward the creative process was an acceptive one, allowing events and materials other than those generally connected with art.

Teapot, 1962, watercolor on paper, 28 3/4 x 22''. The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Gift of Charles Simon. 78.105.

The teapot was given to him by his Mother, thereby adding an ''emotional'' fact for him to realizing it in artistic terms. (Murch, *The Christian Science Monitor,* 1965)

Brooklyn — Architectural Fragment, 1964, watercolor on paper, 29 x 32". Chase Manhattan Bank, New York.

Probably his decision to use this type of subject matter resulted from the influence of his grandfather who was a stone carver and pointed out fragments like this to his young grandson. (Robbins, *Walter Murch,* 1966)

Sphere and Cloth Study, 1964, mixed media on wallpaper, 19 1/4 x 16 1/2". Collection of Frank Picarello, Jr., New Jersey.

Particularly significant to this work was Murch's statement, "Now I see no difference in making the painting or the drawing except that in the case of the drawing, I use drawing materials." In the case of this piece he applied crayon, wash, charcoal and fixitive to the reverse side of wallpaper. (Jacobowitz, Interview, 1967)

Wig Forms, 1964, mixed media on paper, 40 x 26". Collection of Andrew Crispo, New York.

The artist remarked that he began this drawing at random by making lead pencil marks on paper. He added watercolor, wash and even flung materials at the paper. (Jacobowitz, Interview, 1967)

Doll, 1964, mixed media on paper, 24 1/2 x 18 1/2". Collection of Barbara Whipple.

Closer to the size of the original object, this rendition of the doll was completed prior to the painting of the same subject. However, the image appears from within a painterly atmosphere in both versions.

Grey Melon, 1965, mixed media on paper, 19 x 15 1/8". Rhode Island School of Design.

In this instance, Murch distinguishes the drawing with the word "gray" in its title.

Pressure Gauge, 1965, mixed media on paper, 27 3/4 x 21 1/4". Collection of Walter S. Murch, Bolinas, California.

In spite of the delicacy of this work, there is a feeling of tension as a mechanical device is applied to a natural, amorphic mass.